

THE WOODS

EM McDERMOTT

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THE WOODS

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THE WOODS

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To my wolf.

*You 've challenged me to be braver,
and I love you for it.
And for many other things too.*

I will follow you into the shadows.

*“...but Little Red Riding Hood thought to herself,
as long as I live,
I will never by myself leave the path,
to run into the wood,
when my mother has forbidden me to do so.”*

- Little Red Riding Hood

1

I CLOSED MY eyes to taste the wind. The smell of the Woods' dying leaves wafted over the immense wall of my prison and scented the air. It was fall, and the glimpses I'd caught of the outside suggested to me what the ancient forest might look like. Vibrant red at first, and then yellowing, curling, drying, dying.

I opened my eyes. The racetrack, utterly flat, unfurled before me. My mount, Flora, flew around it, her muscles instinctively following the tight curve of the only track she'd ever run.

There was little breeze. Even the wind was subject to the limitations imposed by the wall. Sometimes I imagined I lived in the past, before Big Village became a fortress. But then I remembered the reason we built it, and I felt grateful instead of trapped.

I was coming up on the gate. At this hour, the shifts changed, and the gate would be open. Though I hardly admitted it to myself, this was the reason I chose this time for my daily ride. The first time I rounded the track to see the thick doors thrown wide, fear caught in my throat and I nearly turned back. But I mustered all my courage and rode on, and flooded my eyes with the colors of another world.

I leaned into the turn and the gate came into view. Historical accounts claimed that the tree felled to make the gate was a thousand-year-old oak. Each door was seamless solid wood, so there were no points of weakness. They were attached to a chain, which wrapped around a winch. At all times, several Huntsmen stood ready to open and close the doors for their fellows on patrol, who were the only ones allowed to pass.

A patrol was returning now. The strange shape of an engine blew white steam near the front of the truck. Metal sheets protected large wooden wheels. In the wet season, they could be fitted with flat boards to help prevent the heavy truck from sinking in mud. The invention was one of

many necessities born of constant war, for horses were too easily spooked by monsters.

The open doors of the gate prevented me from seeing the long flatbed behind the engine, but I knew it would contain at least a half-dozen soldiers.

“Where is it?” shouted a Huntsman on the ground to one in the truck.

“They’re bringing it in,” someone called back. “They’re just behind us.”

The truck rolled forward until I could see the team in the back. I knew most of them. Leanna commanded this unit, with Jenn as her second. Victor had a good sense of humor, and Todd was still new enough to his leathers to be nervous. If I’d joined up, we would’ve been in the same class. But Gran would never allow it, and if I were honest, I wasn’t Huntsman material.

During our breach drills, I retreated to the bunkers with the other civilians to tell stories of the brave Huntsmen who kept us safe. As the unofficial town historian, I had a particular interest in the truth behind the legends. I combed for hours through barely legible journals written by survivors of past attacks. I stared wide-eyed at archival drawings of our enemies, monsters big as horses, as they feasted on the flesh of our fallen.

There was one drawing that stuck with me more than all the others. A massive grey wolf, his powerful form stretched long as he jumped the wall like it was nothing but a fallen log in the Woods. Just beneath the taut muscles of his stomach, sharp wire threatened.

I could look up and see it now. The Wall of Thorns. A towering sheet of clean white stone gleamed beneath curled wires that strangled the open sky with tiny barbs. It rose high enough to block all view of the ancient trees outside. I knew, without ever having seen it, that iron spikes blanketed the outside, each one long and sharp enough to enter a wolf’s eye and emerge dripping from the back of his skull.

The Huntsmen defended the wall, and our future. The best I could do was remember our past. The only problem with the arrangement? Only Huntsmen were allowed through the gate.

I slowed Flora and backed off the road and out of the way. The truck turned onto the track, opening up a view of the Woods. Just beyond the gate, a broad dirt path was packed down by the Huntsmen’s trucks. But around that waved a sea of shifting, dancing orange, red, and yellow leaves. Sun-dappled ferns and damp moss made a green carpet. Thin green needles

hung from branches ornamented with real birds. Birds came in here too, but they always left quickly. It was not alive enough in here.

I shifted Flora into the best position to see, glancing guiltily around me, as if I were doing something wrong. Technically, I shouldn't even be here. This section of Big Village was for authorized personnel only. That meant military; that meant not me. But being the granddaughter of the Supreme General came with privileges.

“Hey, Red!” Todd waved as the truck rolled past me. His leathers were dirty with dried mud, and he looked tired, but he was smiling.

“No place for an animal,” Victor shouted. He winked to indicate he was kidding, though I knew his fellow soldiers agreed in earnest that Flora and I should not be here. Commander Leanna surveyed us and pursed her lips. But she said nothing. She couldn’t, not when Gran had given me permission.

Suddenly, shouting voices cut through the stillness. They came from outside. Another truck approached the village, but men were jumping off the back before it reached the gate, axes in hands.

“Get it inside!” one of them shouted. “Now! Now!”

“No!” That voice was familiar. That voice still told me bedtime stories when I woke up after a nightmare. But at night, in our cottage, it didn’t sound so harsh. This was the voice of a commander. Of a Supreme General. “It’s too late. They’re already here.”

Gran. Gran was outside.

My throat felt parched and my heart hammered. I clutched the sleeve of the leather jacket that inspired my nickname, Red. The jacket was once Gran’s. She gave it to my mother, and then to me when Mom died. The dye was rare and hard to make—a red with deep purple tones. In the softest places at the neck and inside the elbows, the color lightened and faded to a red-orange like the rising sun. The jacket was worn and thick, aged and full of memories.

When I was little and Mom wore the jacket, she told me the stories of its scars. She pointed to the deepest scratch of all and whispered that when Gran was young, Gran lived alone in the Woods for a year. One day three wolves attacked her together, and she killed them all with only a single axe.

But what about the scratch on her face? I asked, for I craved to know how Gran received the deep scar that bisected her from mouth to temple.

Sleep now, my mother would say. On the day she died and Gran put the jacket into my hands, it came down to my knees. I wore it anyway. I'd worn it every day since.

I knew that Gran could handle any danger that came at her. But I couldn't. I'd never faced real danger in my life.

Now here I was. The gate was open. And the wolves were here.

I stared at the yawning double doors. Suddenly, their thickness and weight was a hindrance. They would close so slowly. Huntsmen ran to the winch. They leaned all their weight against the handle.

Should I dismount and help? Their muscles strained the leather of their uniform jackets, and I doubted my arms, more used to turning the pages of books than pulling chain, would make much of a difference.

“The bell!”

My eyes found the massive brass bell that served as the village alarm. Its mouth was wide enough to hide a child. It rang to signal danger. It was not ringing now.

A Huntsman swore and abandoned the winch to run to the bell. My heart pounded.

Now the gate will close even more slowly. Everybody in Big Village is at risk.

“I’ve got it!” I shouted. Before I knew it, I was dismounting. I ran to the bell and I gripped the rope that dangled from the heavy clapper. I yanked it as hard as I could. The peal bounced around my head, so loud it almost hurt. Back and forth. Back and forth. I turned away to stare through the still-open gate. It was closing, but slowly. So slowly.

I still could not see Gran. Huntsmen surrounded the ambushed truck, ready to defend something inside. Each held an axe high and ready. Their eyes scanned the trees.

I might see a real wolf.

I couldn’t deny my curiosity. Years spent reading and still, all I knew of them, I’d learned from books and other people’s stories.

From inside the town, other bells took up my warning. Relief flooded me at hearing the system work the way it should. Now every civilian would hear, and hurry to their assigned bunker. I should be among them. But I remained to ring the bell as the birds fled and the Huntsmen hustled.

The huffing engine of a truck added its voice to the noise. It might be Leanna’s unit returning. Soon a whole army of Huntsmen would flood here

to help hold the village's most vulnerable point.

Maybe they'd even open the gate again and go out to reinforce Gran's unit. I shouldn't be here anymore; I had no place in this fight.

As if in answer to my thoughts, a Huntsman appeared to take the clapper from my hands.

"Good job," he said, nodding. "Now get to your bunker. Go."

Behind me, a boom sounded as the wooden doors met. Three huge cast iron bolts slid into place, and Big Village settled once more under a shroud of safety. No more shouts reached us from the soldiers trapped outside. The wood was too thick, the wall too high.

Leanna's truck soared past me. Her team jumped from the back. They unsheathed their axes and held the metal blades high under the sun. In the close quarters of the Woods, where thick old trees with low branches offered constant cover, there was no better weapon for killing monsters.

My fingers unclenched, and feeling flooded back into whitened fingers. I backed away from the bell, and suddenly wondered what I'd been thinking. I should get to my bunker. I did not belong here.

I turned Flora towards the village proper and rode at a fast trot. The outer ring was a bleached desert of fortifications and weapons lockers. White brick and red paint checkered the ground, and short walls rose at intervals to block my way. Not too far off, the imposing whiteness of the military complex towered. Trucks rolled out from wide bays, dotting the vision of white with dark forest green.

It was obvious where Big Village really began. A black line on the ground marked the end of the restricted zone. On the far side lay uneven brown cobblestones. The utilitarian white bricks vanished like last night's nightmare, replaced by tall peaked roofs and gardens outgrowing their fences. Brightly colored window frames accented humble wooden dwellings with shingles twisted at strange angles. Out here the roads were tight and small, and balconies jutted out above us. I always thought the third stories looked in danger of tipping over.

Around my feet, a crowd of villagers flowed like water, and I was caught in the tide. Flora was really too big for these streets, but I had no time to get her back to her stable.

"Red!"

My eyes tracked the crowd for the familiar voice. "Marta?"

"Here."

I found my best friend, laden down with bags full of goods from the market. That explained what she was doing on this side of the village, far from work and home and (most importantly) our assigned bunker. Marta huffed to push a soft brown curl off her face. Her skin was red and sweaty.

“What are you doing with all that?”

She smiled shyly. “Well, I was at the cobblers yesterday, and I met this guy...”

I cut her off. Marta was always meeting guys. She could tell me about it when we were safe. “Come on. Get up. Maybe Flora can get us there on time.”

Marta eyed Flora with distrust. She’d never been riding, despite years of my offers. But the bells pealed and now she had no choice. She handed up her bags and I tucked them in front of me.

“Over there,” I said, pointing to a front step that would help raise her high enough to mount. I guided Flora over, trying to be patient with the crowd that still flowed around us, slowing us down. Truthfully, I was starting to worry that we would not make it to our bunker in time. And this was no drill. If the Huntsmen couldn’t hold back the wolves...

Marta mounted, and muttered under her breath as she struggled to arrange her skirts. I didn’t wait. I steered Flora to a cross street that was wider than this one. We broke free from the crowd, and I kicked Flora into a canter. Marta’s hands squeezed tight on my waist, but I knew I could trust her to tell me if she needed to slow down.

The sun, hidden inside the alleys, blazed strong here in the cloudless blue sky. The village square appeared on our left. Benches peppered the uneven round cobblestones, though no one sat on them now. Small pots held trees and bushes—the only green. Abandoned carts were piled with the freshly cut cheese, soft dresses, and sweet honey that stocked Marta’s bags.

The stones here were painted red, a memorial to lives lost a hundred years ago in the worst of the wolves’ incursions. Red-painted ground like this marked every spot in the village where blood had once been spilt. So many of our records had been lost; it was our way of remembering.

We were close now, passing through the old quarter. Fresh, renovated buildings were interspersed with ruins that promised eventual collapse. A white two-story shop, its windows shattered, served as a playground for village children seeking danger and parental escape.

Huntsmen hurried past us, headed for the gate. I asked Gran once what they did when the warning bell tolled. They couldn't possibly open the gate and go out into the Woods—not when they knew wolves waited. But Gran wouldn't tell me. Military secrets, she said, and then she put on her spectacles and said she'd tell me something else instead, something better. An old fairy tale, the truest one she knew.

We were the only ones left on the road. The speed of the clangs slowed, signaling one minute left before the bunker doors closed.

"It's not a drill," I told Marta over my shoulder.

She shuddered against me, and did not ask how I knew.

The bells stopped. The last ring lingered in my ears. I shivered at the ominous silence. They were closing the doors.

The building that hid our neighborhood's bunker looked like all the others. A small cottage, dark-wood shingles twisted and in need of rehanging. A sky-blue door marked the building for those in the know.

Inside I'd find an ordinary living room with a rocking chair and a cold hearth. I would pull aside a rug on the floor and find a large metal door. I would bang on the door with my fist and it would not open, for once the bunker doors were closed, they did not reopen until the all-clear came down from Gran herself. I rounded the corner and dismounted Flora even before she stopped moving.

"Whoa, hey!" Marta said, and tried to steady herself. But I was thinking of her safety too.

I opened the blue door, dreading what I'd see.

But there were the metal doors, still thrown wide and welcoming. An irritated Huntsman stood above them, shifting from foot to foot and arguing with a Huntsman who stood on the stairs.

"Red!"

"Hey, Trevon." I tried not to let my relief color my voice.

"We were about to close it."

"I'm sorry," I said. But I couldn't be too sorry. If I hadn't been running late, Marta would've been stranded outside alone.

I helped Marta dismount and she hurried down the tight, poorly lit ramp.

"She can't come in," Trevon said, indicating Flora.

"I know." I patted her head and fed her the carrot from my pocket, tying her to the hearth as quickly as I could. Good thing nobody actually lived

here.

Trevon spoke quietly as I passed through the door. “Don’t cut it so close next time, Red. You know I can’t lock you out. Gran would have my position.”

“That’s not true,” I told him, offended at the very idea that Gran would act with such bias. She would never want others put at risk solely to benefit me.

Was this why he’d kept the door open late?

But I didn’t get a chance to hear Trevon’s answer. My head was barely inside when he closed the doors, and a Huntsman inside instantly bolted them with steel. Chain followed, and a heavy lock. Above him, Trevon would be shifting the rug into place to hide the entrance before joining his comrades at the gate.

Sometimes I thought that most of Big Village must stand on hollow ground. Long stretches of wall were lined with supplies—food and water and axes, in case it ever came to that. In school, we learned that the safe rooms were dug out during the height of the Bloody Years, when the wall was shorter and wolf attacks were a regular terror. Much of our written history was destroyed in fires around this time. I knew what was left better than anyone.

Older villagers tried to warn us that we were in danger again. “When I was a child,” one said as I passed, “the bells never tolled. The wolves didn’t dare get close enough to the wall. Now every few weeks there’s a breach of the perimeter! It’s getting dangerous out there again...” His daughter, a grown woman herself, scolded him and told him to be quiet. But I wasn’t so sure she was right.

A child called my name. “Red! We’re over here!”

She gestured extravagantly at herself and her friends. They made a space for Marta and me in their circle.

“I thought you didn’t make it!” the girl, Ariana, said with drama.

“Of course I did. I had to. Who else would tell you a story?”

“Probably Ramon, but he’s not as good as you,” said a serious boy with a solemn face. I laughed.

Inside the bunker, I told Gran’s stories to the children. The other villagers huddled together near the door, holding their knees and coughing in the damp and heavy air. But not me. In the Woods, I might be useless, but the bunkers were a place where words could make a difference.

“Don’t be afraid,” I told the children with a smile. One at a time, I met their eyes. As my words reached them, their small shoulders relaxed. Thoughts of dirt and blood left their minds.

“I’m going to tell you a story—the truest one I know. Once upon a time, in the earliest days of Big Village, there were no wolves in the Woods...”

2

THE ALL-CLEAR CAME through during the climax of my third story. Instantly I rose to my feet, dismissing cries to stay and finish. “I’ll finish it next drill—I promise!” I called back as I slipped through the crowd. Marta smiled at my impatience, and stayed behind to appease my disgruntled listeners with treats from her grocery bags.

My neighbors crowded beneath the door, and together we ascended into the light. I untied Flora and mounted as soon as I could get her outside. I wanted to get back to the gate.

It was closed. A half-dozen trucks were ranged around it, and Huntsmen walked between them in their familiar brown leathers. Nurses and doctors, dressed all in white, carried gurneys heavy with injured soldiers. I checked their faces, but none were Gran. She was there though, standing in a tight huddle of Huntsmen. She pointed towards the square.

That’s when I heard the growl. Deep and menacing, a promise of death and danger. The sound froze every muscle in my body, and ice water crawled along my skin, raising every tiny hair. I tracked the sound to my Gran. The Huntsmen beside her parted, revealing a wolf.

Curling around its body was a length of thick iron chain. The chain dug deep enough across its chest to draw blood even through thick layers of yellow and white fur. The wolf’s front legs lay trapped against its body, twisted at strange and painful angles. Standing, the wolf would be taller than the tallest Huntsman, and heavier than four. It lay on the ground and growled, showing its massive teeth. Even from this distance, I shuddered to see the size of them.

Nervously I studied the chain that wrapped it, and wrapped it again, and again and again and again. Rope was attached to the chain at a dozen places, and the Huntsmen held the ropes tight. I tried to assure myself of my

security. But my mind was soft jam and shivers. Why would Gran bring a wolf inside the wall?

I longed to run to Gran and ask her. To hug her and assure myself that she was safe and okay. But the sight of the wolf leadened my limbs. My blood felt hot and heavy, and I held back.

Gran would only wave me away, anyway.

So I followed at a distance as they dragged it to the village square and tied their ropes to a post buried deep in the ground. They lifted the wolf up on its hind legs so it stood unnaturally tall, like a man. And when she had it secured, Gran told them to ring the bell to call all of Big Village to the square.

The sun was high in the midday sky as the town answered her call. They were loud and shocked and afraid, pressing against each other to get close or get back. Their murmurs and outcries assaulted my ears.

“Why would she do this?”

“That thing doesn’t belong in here!”

“Stay back, child!”

Their words mirrored my own fear and confusion. For a Supreme General to deliberately bring our enemy inside our wall went against every instinct in us. I knew better than anyone: It had never been done. Even a child knew to never ever open the door to a knocking wolf.

But things were changing in the Woods. Huntsmen who returned from patrol shared stories of organized attacks that forced the perimeter they occupied in the Woods to tighten. Old-timers spoke wistfully of the golden age—when Gran was growing up and for the first twenty years of her command—when there were hardly any incidents of violence from our old enemies.

I couldn't imagine it. The wolf I watched now was violence. Coiled power in its bulging muscles, claws sharp as an axe blade, and teeth that could crush bone. But the Huntsmen’s chains were forged to contain it, and no matter how the wolf yanked and screamed and tore its own skin, it could not escape.

Every eye in the village was on it as it shuddered in its bloody chains. Its fur was matted and dirty, its skin covered in cuts and blisters and old scars. It threw up its head and howled.

Eventually it stopped, breathing hard through its long snout, and it looked about at us all with narrow yellow eyes. A whole village stood

staring. A blacksmith's hands held a hammer, and a mother clutched a basket of groceries. Beneath our feet, the spilled contents of market carts spoiled.

Gran stood beside the wolf on the dais, so close they almost touched. She would be killed first if it broke free, killed before she could even raise her blade. This simple gesture quelled my fears and filled me with confidence. If Gran was sure the wolf could not break its chains, then I was sure too. Gran opened her mouth and projected her voice.

"Here you look upon our enemy. A killer of our people. A monster who haunts our Woods." As if punctuating her words, the wolf howled and gnashed its teeth. The crowd gasped and crept back. A small smile came over Gran's face. "My Huntsmen have captured him, at great risk to themselves, so that you could all see."

Eyes fixed with new interest on the subject. What was it we were meant to see? The size of him, certainly. Big pointed ears, long snout. Sharp yellow eyes that searched the crowd, pinning each of us with a stare as if to condemn us personally for his capture.

His eyes met mine and my heart beat heavily. Where I'd expected only blankness and animal rage, I saw intelligence and an understanding of his situation. I shook my head. How could I know that, looking from afar at those small black pupils? It was my own imagination. An idea I'd conjured from staring into Flora's eyes and sensing her intelligence. But the wolves of the Woods weren't like Flora; they weren't animals. They were crazed beasts who murdered us and drank blood and ate limbs whole.

"For decades now, the war has stayed outside the wall. Patrols skirmish with the wolves to keep our perimeter safe, and they succeed. Our wall protects the village and it has not been breached for fifty years. But we all know the wolves have escalated their attacks. It is only the beginning. True war is coming, and war requires sacrifice from us all. Even those of you who do not fight will be asked to serve. To treat our wounded, to forge our axes. To go on strong when your loved ones do not come back from the Woods."

The crowd answered her somber words with silence. The wolf pulled back his lips from his teeth and growled. It was almost like he was laughing.

Gran told us he'd be put down before sunset.

"Why before sunset?" someone shouted.

Gran frowned and her expression turned dark and guarded. “In the darkness they are truly sinister,” she said. “Trust me. You do not wish to meet a wolf after dark.”

The crowd broke up slowly. Some wished to linger longer than others, their faces consumed with fury, fear, or fascination. Some jumped at every howl and then smiled, moving closer, enjoying the thrill of danger. Parents leaned over and whispered to children with big eyes and dry mouths.

“You see,” I overheard one saying to a small boy, “the Supreme General wants us to be ready in case they ever do breach the wall. So that you won’t freeze up, darling. Take a good look. You see that, you run.”

“I won’t run,” his older sister said. “As soon as I can, I’m joining up. I’ll do whatever it takes to keep our family safe.”

As the crowd thinned, I swallowed my own fear and moved closer. I wanted to speak to Gran, and she would not leave the wolf’s side while he was breathing inside our wall.

“Gran! Grandma!” I called when I was close enough. Her sharp ears found me instantly.

“Red. Stay back.”

“Isn’t it safe?”

“Of course it is,” Gran said. She’d brought the whole village here, so it must be. But as always, she protected me more than all the others. I took the obligatory step back.

Gran wore her Huntsman leathers, like always. Deep brown leather leggings, with a harness over her hips to give her pockets. A tan leather jacket kept her warm through the seasons and served as armor. Black patches on the shoulders and stripes around her upper arms showed her rank. Beneath the jacket she wore a simple white shirt, and strapped to her back was a holster that held two crossed axes. Only one was in its place. The other rested loosely in her hand, its rim red with blood. On her cheek were a few spots of blood to match.

It was strange to see blood on a face so similar to the one I saw in the mirror: narrow, with sharp cheekbones and a prominent chin. Gran’s curling hair was pure white and cut short. Each morning she sculpted the wild mess into ringlets. I couldn’t be bothered, and wore mine below my shoulders, most often pulled back into a ponytail. Short pieces escaped their bondage and framed my face with a halo of red-blond curls—or frizz, depending how you looked at it. I had freckles under my eyes where Gran had her

wrinkles. Even our eyes almost matched. Gran's were a sharp pale blue like mine, though they lacked the ring of hazel that circled just around my pupil. I had nothing to match her scar, which started at the corner of her lip like a smile and climbed across her cheek and into her hairline. Many decades old now, it stood out only when she laughed.

“You were outside the wall.”

“Of course.” Her gaze scanned the crowd, the dais, the prisoner.

“I was riding and I heard your call to close the gate.”

Her eyes stopped scanning and locked on me sharply. “Did you get to a bunker?”

“Of course!” I managed to sound offended, despite how close it had been. I decided not to tell her I’d rung the bell. I hoped no one else would either. I suspected she would be angry that I’d risked myself, instead of proud.

Gran nodded, satisfied. “They won’t get through the gate, Red. Not while I’m Supreme General.” Her eyes returned to their scan. Ever-watchful, ever on-guard.

“How many wolves were out there?” I shuddered to imagine how it would feel to be one of the Huntsmen who faced them. But what was, to me, an impossible feat, was a relatively average day for Gran.

She answered absently. “Four.”

I shivered. “Did we lose anyone?”

Gran blinked and her focus turned to me. The weight of responsibility lined her eyes. “Their families will witness the execution.” She glanced at the sky, searching for the rising moon. It was still hours away; not a hint of orange stole the blue from the sky.

I did not know if I wanted to stay. But before I decided, Gran chose for me.

“Go home Red. You don’t need to see.”

I tried to listen. I stabled Flora and meandered home. I flipped through a book, but couldn’t concentrate. I picked through a basket of clothes that needed mending, but my mind was still in the square with Gran and the wolf. I pricked my finger and bled on the fabric.

This execution was a historic event. How could I be the only villager told not to come? I felt compelled to bear witness. If I couldn’t do that, what use was I?

I returned to linger at the edge of the square. I took off my jacket and sat still and silent on the base of a statue, hoping Gran would not see. As sunset approached, a crowd flowed back towards the dais. Some jeered and shouted; others stood silent and tight, afraid even now.

Gran spoke words I could not hear to the families of the fallen Huntsman. She moved from one to another, looking every mourning villager in the eye. She whispered words of comfort or gratitude. They watched her with tear-soaked cheeks as she climbed onto the dais once more. She raised her voice and addressed the crowd, but at the very edge of the square, I was too far to hear. She finished speaking and raised her axe, and the crowd raised their fists and cried out in agreement and exultation as she took aim for the neck of the wolf.

Behind her, the wolf seemed to understand. His eyes were on the gleaming edge of the axe in Gran's hand. And then they sought the sky once more. He gave her his neck as if he welcomed the death that came for him, and he howled. Loud and insistent, over and over, he made an endless crooning sound at the sky.

He calls to his brothers. The thought came unbidden, and I shook my head at my own silliness.

Gran's axe fell. It split his neck apart, and red gushed out. The crowd gasped in delight or horror and stepped back as one. His howl became choked, and then ceased. The massive bulk of his head fell to rest against his chest.

Below his feet there was already a pool made by his cuts. Now the pool spread as blood leaked from his neck to stain the red-painted ground. Cheers rose up in the crowd, and clapping. Gran pulled a cloth from her belt and cleaned her axe. She re-sheathed it, and then she stepped away from the dead wolf towards some of her men, who stood waiting nearby. She spoke orders to them, readying herself to leave. Cleanup didn't require the Supreme General. She would head home, and she'd expect to find me there.

Silently I slipped from my post and walked towards our cottage. Orange laced the sky and I shivered in the cool fall air. I slipped my coat back over my shoulders and buttoned it up.

My mind was in turmoil.

I barely knew where I went.

Over and over in my mind, my Gran lowered her axe. The wolf's head fell heavy on his chest and his blood spread. His howl echoed in my ears,

only to turn to choking.

I'd never seen something die before. Maybe that was it.

But no, that wasn't true. I'd seen horses die, and pets, and once I'd looked in the back room at the butcher's shop. None of those things disturbed me. Perhaps because those deaths were natural. This wolf's death was anything but natural.

This was murder.

The instant the thought occurred to me, I shook it away.

The wolves were beasts. They were less than animals. What that wolf did to those poor Huntsmen—that was the real murder. And Gran faced them down every day.

In my mind I heard her voice telling me for the thousandth time that I should not join the Huntsmen. Sometimes, I resented being left out. Being trapped inside.

But today, she'd given me what I wished for. Today I saw a real wolf, in the flesh. Now I walked home with goosebumps creeping along my neck, making me look over my shoulder.

In the darkness they are truly sinister.

And darkness had fallen. An irrational fear gripped me, and I sped towards home, my boots tripping on uneven cobblestones as I tried not to run.

Gran was right. I was not built to be a Huntsman.

3

MY FAVORITE PUB was The Rusty Axeman, a go-to haunt for off-duty Huntsmen. Since coming of age two years ago, Marta and I had spent many of our free evenings at the Axeman, drinking our beers and drinking up the stories of the soldiers. I was fairly certain Marta hoped to find a husband there, and I enjoyed watching her try. Tonight I needed to be there, to let the loudness and the smell of spilled beer chase away the howl of the dead wolf in my mind.

I gathered Marta after dinner, and we walked over together. She told me about the guy at the cobbler's shop, and I made her promise to bring me the leftovers of the feast she planned to make him.

The place was full. It was rowdier than usual too. A celebration and a memorial. Too often, they went together.

I sighted Jenn at a table in the back. She sat with Todd and a few Huntsmen I didn't know. Jenn saw me too, and gestured me over, pushing at her colleagues to make room on the benches.

"Come on, move down, move down," she was saying as Marta and I approached.

Marta's brown eyes darted around the crowded table, particularly noting the faces of the handsome and unfamiliar. She stretched out her hand to one of them right away. "Hi, I'm Marta."

Her dress was classic and simple, but a little more low-cut than it needed to be, and her ample chest was shown off to its best advantage. Marta was beautiful with her soft figure and silky brown hair, and men always looked at her before they eyed my skinny frame and wild curls.

I tried not to ruin her efforts with a laugh. "What happened to the cobbler?" I whispered into her ear.

"What about him? That dinner's tomorrow." She winked, and sank down next to the handsome Huntsman, whose name was apparently Dylan.

I pointedly took the seat next to Todd, on the other side of the table.

Dylan still wore his full leathers, making him a stiff and dignified vision compared to Todd, who lounged in linen pants and a sweater. Jenn wore only the jacket of her uniform, which she rarely took off, even in full summer. The padded shoulders and arm stripes were green, indicating her high rank. Beneath the jacket she wore a long brown dress. The softness of the dress and the hard lines of the uniform served only to accent each other, the same way her sun-bleached blond mohawk sharpened her sun-tanned skin and smile.

“Introductions,” Jenn said.

Though I knew a lot of Huntsmen, there were thousands of people in Big Village and even I couldn’t know them all.

“Guys, this is Marta and Red.” Jenn signaled the barman to bring a few more beers. “You know Todd, you met Dylan. This is Ahmaud.” She indicated the last man at the table. Brown skin, tightly buzzed hair, and stern eyes. His shoulder muscles showed through his knitted sweater.

“That’s a great jacket you’ve got,” Dylan told me, aptly noting why I was called Red.

“Thanks.” I turned my attention to Ahmaud as the barman dropped our beers. “Were you out today?”

Ahmaud unconsciously raised his chest. A show of pride. “Our unit helped capture the prisoner.”

“Congratulations.” It seemed the right thing to say. “What happened at the gate when you were bringing him in?”

Ahmaud lifted his chin. “That’s need-to-know.”

“Todd?”

“I wasn’t there,” said Todd, drinking his beer.

“I saw you, Todd. You shouted hello to me. Remember?”

His face flushed red as Jenn laughed. “Red, you know more about our operations than any other civilian I know.”

“So why not tell me a little more?”

“We don’t want to go scaring ordinary citizens,” Ahmaud said, with some pomp.

I rolled my eyes and appealed to Jenn with my eyes.

Jenn addressed the others. “Gran is Red’s grandma, guys. She’s cool. You can tell her about our capture of the prisoner.” And though she said the

words in support of my cause, they seemed to me to contain a warning in them too. Like, *whatever you say to her may get back to Gran.*

Ahmaud leaned forward, his shoulders bunching up as he pressed his arms on the sticky tabletop. “The Supreme General is your grandmother? Really? She’s a legend! What’s that like?”

I laughed at the familiar question. “To me, she’s just Gran. Like a really fit grandma who still tells you stories and makes you soup when you’re sick.”

Ahmaud shook his head. “She’s anything but just a grandma. She revolutionized the way we hunt! She moves through the Woods like she was born to them. Like this morning—I’ve never seen a hunt like it, Red. Your Gran led it herself. She took us deeper in than I’ve ever gone. We just patrol the perimeter, you know? Our job is to keep the village safe. There’s no sense going too far in.”

I nodded. Rumor was that once, the Huntsmen patrolled the deep Woods, even living out there for months at a time in cottages surrounded by trees. But if it was ever true, it was not done anymore. What was Gran thinking this morning?

“We went off the path. We left our trucks behind. And then, like we all knew would happen, we heard a growl.”

Marta and Dylan were listening now. Marta was spellbound, her eyes round with fear.

“I’ve never fought a wolf and tried not to kill him before,” Ahmaud said, taking a sip of his drink. “That was a trip. It took thirteen of us to take him down and get him tied up. Harder than killing them, as it turns out.”

“Gran fought?”

“Oh yes,” Jenn said. “She moves like she’s half her age. Sometimes she still comes out in the yard and teaches the new recruits a thing or two. The woman knows what to do with an axe.”

As if on cue, I heard the thwack of an axe landing in wood on the far side of the pub. I glanced over and saw the Huntsmen from another table had started a game.

The Rusty Axeman got its name because one of its walls was a massive target. Orange glow from the street lights outside showed through the holes. Old axes rested in boxes a dozen feet from the wall. Drunken Huntsmen tested their skills while wood pillars thick as the gate kept the roof up.

“What I don’t understand,” Todd said, “is why she did it. Why capture a live wolf? Why show him to the town?”

“She told you herself.” I sat back in my seat and took a sip of beer. “War is coming. She wants us all to be prepared.”

“War’s already here,” Ahmaud said. “Today’s execution was a strategy. A volley of arrows. It sends a message. We can come where you live and take one of you, and you can’t do the same to us.”

What an odd thing to say about dumb animals.

I shook my head. “The message is for us. You guys don’t get it; going out there all the time, I think you forget.”

“Forget what?” Todd asked.

I looked over at Marta. “Forget how scared we are in here of what’s out there. None of us know. None of us have any idea, except that it’s more dangerous than we can imagine. The war may already be out there, but it’s not in here. Not yet. And if it comes in here, none of us ordinary villagers will have a clue what to do.”

It was quiet at the table while the Huntsmen chewed over my words. I wasn’t proud of them. There was a part of me that wished to be a part of their club and look danger in the face. I wished I could look in the mirror and see the strength I saw when I looked at Jenn. But Gran made it clear years ago that she’d never allow me to join up, and even if she hadn’t, it was obvious to everyone (including me) that I wasn’t suited to hunting. I was a soft and gentle soul, Gran said, but what she meant was that I lacked her will.

Ahmaud broke the silence. “Well. Let’s remedy that right now.” He stood, and reached across the table for my hand. Instinctively, I put my hand in his, and he lifted me off the bench and propelled me towards one of the boxes full of axes. “You ever held one before?”

I looked at him as if he’d insulted me, but the truth was that I only moved Gran’s around the house when it was in my way. In years of coming here, I’d never even played the game. I was always too afraid to look stupid in a packed bar full of warriors. Somehow, after the execution and Gran’s speech today, this concern seemed less important.

“Pick one then,” Ahmaud said.

I looked at the bin. “Does it matter?”

He shrugged. That meant yes, but I wasn’t sure how. I picked up an axe and studied it, and then looked at another. They were both old, the wood of

the handles badly chipped. There were chips in the steel as well, and one blade was clearly dull. I picked the one that looked a little less beat up.

“Good. You guys playing too?” The rest of our table had followed us, and now crowded around the small table that sat behind the massive wooden pillar demarcating our lane. Ahead of me on the ruined wall, faded paint suggested several bullseyes. They looked no more frequently hit than the unmarked brown.

“Come on, Marta,” I said. She was the only other person I wanted to play; the more of the Huntsmen played, the worse I’d seem in comparison.

“Oh no,” Marta said. “Not happening.” She, I knew, had never picked up an axe and never wanted to. That was a job for the shining Huntsman who would one day share her home.

“I’ll play,” Todd said. He came forward to stand with us, and took the beaten-up axe I’d discarded. Ahmaud picked through the remaining choices and carefully selected an axe that looked like all the others. Dylan and Marta were back to whispering, and I thought we’d lost them again, but suddenly Dylan announced loudly that he would play as well. He came forward to choose an axe, and took even longer than Ahmaud.

By then I’d finished my first drink, and I ordered another. The better to say I was bad because I was drunk.

Ahmaud went first. His grip light and confident, he lifted the axe to his shoulder and swung it forward. At just the right moment, he let it go, and it landed with a confident thud near the center of the target. “Now, your turn. Do you know how to hold it?”

I shook my head. Ahmaud instructed me on the proper placement of my hand (near the bottom of the handle), and how my grip should be (stop clenching it). I should start the axe over my shoulder and let go when my arm was fully extended. There was something about wrist motion, but I kind of missed it. Dylan interjected helpful tips, his eyes roving to Marta as he corrected me.

“Alright, alright, I’ve got it.” I followed the instructions exactly, and the axe bounced off the wood plank floor about halfway to the target. A dozen nearby dents kept the one I made company. I was not the first failure at The Rusty Axeman pub.

Behind me, Jenn was laughing so hard she snorted some beer. Todd was saying how it was a good try, a good solid try. Ahmaud was trying not to

smile, and Marta was shouting at them all to give me a break. I deserved another turn.

“Oh no,” I said. “Let everyone else go while I recover my pride.” I took a deep swig of beer.

“The thing you have to do, Red, is just relax.” Todd spoke with the voice of someone who recently took classes on the matter. “Don’t tense up. Treat the axe like it’s just an extension of your own arm. You tell it what to do, not the other way around.” He swung his weapon in a wide arc over his chest, so I could see the looseness in his shoulders and wrists.

“Thanks Todd. It’s your turn.” I signaled for a third beer.

Todd landed his axe in the wall just outside the target, and Dylan’s landed just beside Todd’s. At least I was getting lessons from the best of them, I thought.

On my second throw, Ahmaud tried to correct the mistakes I made the first time, but I still stuck my axe in the floor. By the third throw, I was bouncing off the wall, and only once in the game did I get the axe to stick in the target. That called for more beers all around, and a second game. This time Marta agreed to play too, and Dylan came up behind her to show her with his whole body how to make the perfect swing.

“Not fair, not fair!” I cried when the axe they threw together landed in the target. Mine were still bouncing, sending anyone close to the wall scrambling. “I call foul play!”

Jenn was laughing, but she was also winning. Ahmaud was solidly in second place, and he sidled up behind me, offering to help me throw the way Dylan had helped Marta. I didn’t want that kind of help, but I wanted something else. Information.

I leaned so close I could smell his beer breath.

“You ready? You have to face the target.”

“No, wait. Ahmaud...what happened today at the gate?”

Ahmaud pursed his lips and looked away.

“Come on, it’s a simple question. I won’t tell anyone you told me. I swear.”

Ahmaud studied my face. “If you tell anyone I told you, I’ll lose my position.”

Everyone was always afraid I would tattle to Gran on them. I never had and never would. “I swear.”

He sighed. "Alright. So, Gran roped her prisoner. She hunted to capture, instead of to kill. Crazy. But he was a real brutal one. Killed twenty of us in the last couple of months. I think she wanted to punish him, you know?"

I tried to keep my face impassive. I didn't want my frown to stop Ahmaud from sharing. But I could not reconcile my Gran with the picture he painted.

"Anyway. We had him secure. But the others came for him before we could get him through the gate. They tried to take him back."

"They do that?!" I'd imagined the brutal animals as devoid of feeling for each other as they were for us.

For some reason my surprise seemed to worry Ahmaud. He studied my face as if he wished to ask a question. "Red," he started. "You do know..." He stopped, as if the rest of the sentence was obvious.

"Know what?"

Ahmaud pursed his lips. His expression became guarded, almost worried, and he muttered a reminder to keep what he'd told me to myself.

"My turn?" He asked loudly, turning back to the game. But it was mine.

Peeling my eyes off Ahmaud, I threw my axe at the wall. It sank into the left side of the target, right on the edge, and everyone around congratulated me as if I'd triumphed. Everyone except Ahmaud, who quietly finished his beer and slipped away.

4

THE NEXT NIGHT, I spent in with Gran. Just Gran and me at home with a fire and my sewing and her stories. These nights, when just the two of us sat together, had been precious to me since I was nine years old, when my parents had died only weeks apart of a flu epidemic that traveled like fire through our closed community. After that, Gran was almost all I had in the world. Gran and Marta and the village.

The fire crackled and warmed us. Gran's cushioned rocker creaked as she took it back and forth, back and forth.

Dinner was over, and she was not in her leathers. Tonight, my Gran looked just like a regular grandma, the only betraying feature of her true self the scar across her face. A long white nightgown swirled around her feet and on her head was a matching nightcap. Her feet were bare and close to the fire. It turned them orange and cast shadows in all the tiny wrinkles.

"I will tell you the oldest tale, shall I?" Grandma said, and I nodded, smiling. It was the best one she told.

"Once, in the earliest days of Big Village, there was no wall between us and the Woods. In fact, our woodcutters went out into its depths each day to ply their craft. Children ran through the trees playing their games. Lovers relaxed under the shade of its trees. There were creatures who lived in the woods, of course, but none were violent, and the villagers lived in peace with them.

"Then one night, a man like no one had ever seen before came into the village. He had yellow eyes and pointed teeth and pointed ears. The man was a sorcerer, possessed of strange and powerful magics. At first, of course, the villagers distrusted this stranger, but they soon came to love him, for he cured their ailments with the magic potions from his apothecary shop.

“One of his customers was a young woman, the daughter of the butcher. In time, the sorcerer fell in love with her shy smile, and she with his cleverness. They wished to marry. But her father, an unyielding and traditional man, distrusted the newcomer and his magic. They wed in secret, though it created a divide between the couple and her family.

“Then one day, a wolf walked out of the woods and into the village. This wolf was unnaturally big, and everyone was afraid. But at first the wolf was friendly. He walked to the apothecary’s shop and he knocked on the door with his paw.

“‘May I help you?’” the apothecary asked the wolf.

“The wolf spoke in a man’s voice, smooth as butter. ‘I have a thorn in the bottom of my paw, and I require the help of your medicines,’ the wolf lied. The apothecary let him in.

“Nobody knows what the wolf truly came for, but once he saw the apothecary’s wife, he wanted the shy beauty for himself. The apothecary treated the wolf’s paw, and after, the wolf demanded the man’s sweetheart as well. The apothecary refused. The wolf’s civilized demeanor left him. He growled and gnashed his big teeth. But the apothecary was not frightened, and the wolf left without his prize.

“‘I knocked and you let me in,’ the wolf called as he left. ‘That was a mistake. I shall be back and have your wife, and you can do nothing to stop me.’ He walked back into the woods and left the village in terror.”

Gran leaned in and took a deep breath. The declaration from the big bad wolf led to her favorite part—the very first wolf attack on the village, when the wolf stole the apothecary’s wife for himself. She always told it with relish. But just as she began, there was an assertive knock on our door, and she got up to answer it instead.

It was Victor. His coat sleeves displayed brown stripes and his brow dripped sweat. His eyes looked tired and wild, and he nursed a long gash across his chest. “General,” he said in greeting.

Without a word, Gran walked out the door with him and shut it behind her. Quietly as I could, I put aside the shirt I mended and I inched over to the window. I knelt below the sill and breathed quietly, trying to catch their words.

“—a whole pack, a dozen wolves at least—”

“But it’s night.”

“All the same, ma’am. Never seen so many together, and wolves for sure, night or not. Miquela’s unit was decimated. We have injured. They had us outnumbered. Chased us until we got close to the gate, then they melted into the trees like they were never there.”

“Why didn’t you sound the bell?”

As if in answer, the familiar ringing destroyed the quiet night. “We tried, ma’am. They took down the box outside so we couldn’t sound an alert unless we were inside. If not for that, Colonel Leanna would’ve followed protocol, ma’am; I’m sure of it.”

Gran was silent a moment. Then she put her hand on the captain’s arm. “Go look after your injury—we’ll need you in fighting form.”

The man nodded, and Gran turned as if to come back inside.

“General—”

She turned back.

“What are you going to do?”

“We knew this was coming, Captain, and we’re prepared. I’ll lead the hunt myself.” With that, she opened the door and returned to me, catching me looking guilty and worried at the window.

“Storytime’s over,” she said. “Get to the bunker.”

The village was a riot of activity. Families woken from sleep stumbled through the streets in shock. Never had the bells sounded at night before. Never.

A Huntsman pushed past me and I stumbled. I glared at the offender before I recognized the buzzed brown hair.

“Dylan!” I sped up to reach him, for he would not slow down. I shoved at villagers in their slippers.

He looked sidelong at me as I caught up. “Red. You should be in your bunker.”

“I’m heading there. Do you know what happened?”

“Some of our guard units got attacked. Massive casualties. I had the night off.” He sounded ashamed and full of fury. “We’ll get them now though. Your Gran’s ordered us all into the Woods.”

“All?!”

“We’re going hunting tonight, Red,” Dylan said. Strapped on his back, the sharp two-sided axe that was a part of every Huntsman’s uniform

gleamed. Beneath it his leathers were crisp and perfect, as if he'd just been sitting at home, waiting for this call.

"Gran said she'll lead it herself."

Dylan stopped running and turned to me. He put a hand on my arm and squeezed. "She'll be fine. She's the best of us, your Gran."

I grabbed his shoulder as he'd taken mine, and I looked into his bright eyes.

"Be careful out there," I said.

He nodded, and started his jog once more.

I stood in the street, alone yet surrounded, and I thought about the bunker behind me and the war ahead. Then I began to run again.

Flora was agitated when I reached the barn. Engines started and Huntsmen shouted and steel clanged on steel as the military readied itself for war.

Far from the stalls, in what once must've once been an office, I kept my most precious things. No one used this stable anymore except for me, and so it had become a secret, private refuge. I came here to read sometimes, and my notes were piled untidily on a desk, held down by the books they discussed. In the corner was an old cedar box, kept securely closed. The area around it was impeccably clean, and a small lock prevented anybody but me from looking inside. I removed the key from my pocket.

The bells slowed. One minute left.

I twisted the key in the lock and opened the rusty hinges of the box.

Inside were memories. The world slowed down as I buried my fingers in the scarf that was once my mother's. Red, like my jacket—a perfect match. She spent months experimenting with dyes to make it. She would tickle my nose with it while she told her stories, and never took it off in winter. Somehow when she'd died, her scarf felt too special to wear, and I buried it instead in this box.

Now I packed it into a basket and ran.

The bells went silent. Time's up.

I thought of Trevon, standing at a set of open doors, his eyes searching for a glimpse of my red coat. But I couldn't be a good citizen right now. I had to be a granddaughter instead.

This was a historic hunt. Everything I'd ever read told me this, and so did the thump of my heart and the coldness in my gut.

There was something I had to do.

I knew the way to Gran's office, and nobody tried to stop me. In every direction, the Huntsmen flowed through their tasks, uniforms skewed and eyes red with rage and sudden waking.

Gran was at her desk, bent over a map. She'd taken the time to change into her leather pants and white shirt, though her jacket and harnesses and axes still lay waiting on a nearby chair. A half dozen officers surrounded her. They peered over her shoulder as she pointed and asked quick sharp questions. Then she saw me.

"Red. What are you doing here? You should be in your bunker. Sam, take Red to the closest bunker. Tell them to let her in on my orders."

"Wait, wait, Gran. I'll go in a second. I just brought you something. I know you're about to lead the hunt yourself, and I thought you should have it."

Her eyebrows arched, telling me to give it to her as quickly as possible and go.

I lifted the basket from my side and placed it on top of her map. With quick hands that belied her white hair and wrinkled cheeks, she lifted the lid and looked inside.

"For luck," I said quietly.

"Leave us," Gran snapped. In an instant the room was empty of everyone but us. Gran came around the desk and hugged me. In her eyes there were tears, as there always were when she remembered her. Her daughter, my mother. With care, she lifted the scarf from the basket and tied it around her waist. Not how my mother used to wear it, but my mother didn't have to worry about un-holstering her axes.

"I'm proud of you," I told her. "Go get 'em."

She smiled at me, and pushed a tendril of hair away from my forehead. "My sweet girl," she said. Then a switch flipped, and she was a warrior again. "Go with Sam. Get to a bunker."

I left Gran's office. Sam waited outside. She escorted me out of the outer ring, towards a bunker near the edge of the square. We were nearly there when I heard the screaming.

It was close. Too close.

Sam took off running before I had time to think. "Get to the bunker!" she shouted over her shoulder. But instead I followed her towards the square.

A howl cut through the air, sharp and near. I stopped dead in my tracks and someone collided with me and knocked me to the ground. The breath left my body. Never before had I heard a howl that close. Never except once, yesterday, when Gran brought a wolf inside our wall.

When I got to the square, they were already fighting it. A half dozen Huntsmen, axes flashing, attacked the wolf. One after the other. As many as could encircle it without colliding. But with its giant paws it slammed them back.

Leanna swiped its side with a shallow cut before it knocked the axe from her hands and sent her to the ground. A casual swipe of its paw repelled Sam and another Huntsman at once.

I saw Ahmaud among the fighters. He threw his axe, landing it solidly in the beast's front shoulder. The beast roared in fury and pain, and the next second its teeth were around Ahmaud's middle, and his screams pierced the night, and then he was silent. The beast dropped him on the ground as I watched in silent horror.

Leanna got to her feet. There was only one other man left with her.

Suddenly, everything I'd done tonight seemed insane. I'd only just resolved to turn away from danger, and here I was. My ears were ringing with a strange high-pitched sound that was not the bells, and I thought that if I was not frozen in place I would run for the bunkers right now and never look back.

That's when I saw Gran marching towards the wolf.

In each hand, she carried an axe. One already dripped blood; she had clearly picked it up from the ground, the weapon of a fallen fighter. She approached the wolf like there was no one in the square but the two of them, and the wolf saw her as she came. He howled once more, and quickly he disposed of the other Huntsmen, throwing Leanna and tearing at the man until he came apart.

Gran and the wolf circled each other. Yellow street lights cast sharp shadows. There was no moon and no stars.

Suddenly Gran moved with speed like I'd never seen. Her axes spun and flashed, and in a second she was inside the wolf's defenses and slashing at his legs. As he snapped at her, she retreated, dancing outside his jaws. His legs below the knees were bleeding on both sides with several gashes, and for an instant I felt a surge of pride and confidence that Gran would triumph.

But he was a wolf. In a flash he pounced and he bit her on her right arm. His jaws closed so tight I knew her arm was gone. The axe fell from her hand and the wolf shook his head. There was her arm in his massive jaws, and he threw it back and swallowed it down.

I heard screaming and it was my own. My legs moved to take me to her, but someone held me back. The world was getting blurry as my Gran fell to her knees. Blood coated her side and her face was pale.

The yellow eyes of the wolf were bright and huge as he approached her. Taking his time, he savored his kill.

His jaw opened, he bent down, and I knew he would finish it, but Gran's other arm came up and the axe was still in it. With a massive groaning scream, she buried it in his chest.

They fell to the ground together, their blood pooling on the red-painted square.

5

THEY CHECKED TO be sure the wolf was dead before they let me run to her. Only then did the strong arms holding me let go, and I stumbled blurry-eyed across the square towards the fallen form of my grandma. The color draining from her face spread to soak my boots. Her eyes were closed.

I knelt in her blood, and reached out my shaking hands to untie my mother's scarf from around her waist. A Huntsman rushed over and lifted Gran's body so I could pull the scarf out from under her. It was squishy with wet, no longer the brightest red thing. I wrapped the scarf around the stump of her shoulder and pulled it tight.

"Can you get it tighter?" I begged.

The soldier reached over and pulled, his muscles bulging. The flow of blood slowed and I took my first breath.

"Is she alive?" Colonel Leanna said.

The closest Huntsman put his fingers on her neck. He nodded, but he frowned too.

She pointed to two men. "Get her to the hospital." Before the words were finished, she was already turning away to address the others. "How did he get in? When?"

Everyone spoke at once, but no one had answers. Only questions.

Leanna held up a hand to call for silence. "First, we have to know if there are more of them. We'll do a sweep of the whole village. Start at the gate and move east. Use search pattern beta."

The two men took my Gran. They lifted her up by her shoulders and her feet and they ran with her towards a large brown building with a bubbling potion sketched on the swinging sign over the door. I followed them.

They knocked on the door, and it opened. A woman with thick waving hair and sharp eyes assessed quickly. "Get her on that table."

Gran was not the only patient at the hospital. In the lantern light, I saw Victor sitting in a chair near the back, his arm in a sling. Four other beds were occupied. Behind a set of hanging curtains, ghoulish shadows performed a surgery. Gran's table was behind a curtain too. I moved to follow, and the doctor stepped out in front of me.

"Sorry, honey. This is as far as you go." She guided me to a chair and sat me down. "I'll come get you when we're finished."

Wait, I tried to say, but my tongue was stuck. The world spun and blurred, sped up and slowed down. I tried not to watch the shadows behind the curtain, or decipher the quiet murmurs of their voices, or smell the burning smell of the cautery.

I did not sleep but I was not awake. The sky was the only measure of time. A black inky sky with no moon, grey by the time the doctors emerged from behind their white curtain to tell me that Gran was alive. They wheeled her outside the curtain and they said I could sit with her.

Gran was an unmoving shape in the bed. She was an ancient creature, her sallow skin showing every wrinkle. The stump of her right arm was bandaged, the wrap coated in fluid that oozed from the cauterized wound.

"Gran," I whispered. "Gran, can you hear me?"

I reached out to hold her hand, but there was no hand. Sniffling, I dragged my chair around the bed to the other side. There I sat down and I took my Gran's cold hand inside my own. I hadn't washed mine and her dried blood flaked off as I rubbed my thumb on her skin.

"In case you can hear me, I'll tell you a story."

Only hours ago, Gran and I sat together in our rockers while she told me this tale. Then she fought a wolf and it bit off her arm and now she might never wake up.

"Where were we? Right, the apothecary overcame the butcher's protests and married his sweetheart. Then the wolf came and declared his desire for the apothecary's wife.

"Well, the wolf went back into the woods alone, but he was not alone when he returned. Three other wolves came with him. They tore into the apothecary's shop, ripping the door from its hinges. The apothecary tried to hold them off with his magics, but he only managed to save his own life. Injured and defeated, he watched as the wolves carried away his great love.

"The girl's father and the apothecary put aside their differences. The whole village rallied behind the butcher, his four sons, and the apothecary

as they ventured into the woods to rescue the woman they all loved.

“But the wolves were ready for them. They met the villagers with violence, and the butcher’s four sons were killed. Robbed of all his children, the butcher returned to the village a defeated man. The apothecary donned black clothes. The woodcutters hung up their axes. No longer did the villagers step out into the now-dangerous woods.

“But this was not enough for the wolves, who had a taste for sweet young blood. Only a few months passed before they returned to steal away a shepherdess. Their third victim was just a baby girl—the daughter of the ill-fated apothecary and his lost wife, a blond beauty just like her mother.

“The apothecary called for the village to build a wall to protect itself. The village agreed and a wall was built. But the wolves jumped the wall. The villagers raised the wall higher and mounted iron thorns on the outside. Still the wolves came and made young girls their prey. So the villagers mounted guards on the wall, and trained men, called Huntsmen, to fight the bloodthirsty beasts who prowl the Woods under the light of our bright shining sun.

“As for the sorcerer, he served the village for many years. Then one day he left. Some say he seeks magic that could kill the wolves, and that one day he will return to give us back our woods.”

I leaned in close. “But it’s just a fairy tale, Gran. The real hero of Big Village is you.” I squeezed her only hand.

I must’ve fallen asleep. I woke shivering, haunted by unremembered shadows that came into focus as Gran’s white face swam before my eyes. Suddenly I was awake. “Is she alive? Is she alive?”

I did not know who I asked, but I looked left and there was Marta, sitting in a chair at my side. She took a deep breath, and a cold wave of terror threatened to come over my head and end me.

“She’s alive,” Marta said, and the wave dissipated and I felt prickly hot with relief. “The doctors say she lost a lot of blood though, and she’s old to recover from an injury this severe. They say we’re still waiting to see.”

Waiting to see. There was the cold again, seeping through my chest. I breathed it like a runner in winter.

Outside the sky was grey and cloudy. Water speckled the window. The bells rang, unending.

“What are you doing here?”

“I heard about Gran; I had to come.” Marta sat with her knitting in her lap. Her fingers followed the pattern without thought. “Do you want some water or something?”

I shook my head, then changed my mind. Marta passed me a glass and I chugged it down.

“How long was I asleep?”

“You’ve been asleep since I got here. It’s the afternoon.”

“What’s going on?”

“Colonel Leanna has taken charge of the Huntsmen while your Gran’s unconscious. She ordered a sweep of the village, but they didn’t find any more wolves. At noon, she opened the bunkers. A lot of people didn’t make it in the first time, because everything was so crazy with the alarm going off at night. She let everyone in, and then she sealed the doors again. Told us to prepare for days down there. That the Huntsmen are going hunting. They left as soon as the bunker doors closed.”

“Why aren’t you down there?”

Marta picked at a burr on her yarn. “When they opened the doors, I overheard them talking about Gran.”

My heart turned hot and tears came from nowhere. I took Marta’s hand and squeezed it. “Thanks.” My hand was speckled in dried blood, and suddenly I felt disgusting. I sniffled and rubbed my face. “I’m going to go clean up. You’ll sit with her?”

“Of course.”

I moved stiffly through the rows of beds towards the water pump and basins in the back. Victor was gone; the four Huntsmen in the beds were not. But they were the only beds that were occupied, which meant the hunters had not returned. Not even to send back their injured. *What was happening out there?*

Periodically the doctors checked Gran’s bandage. Up and down Gran’s chest rose, shallow and quick. Marta sat beside me knitting as I sat in my chair and watched time pass. Outside my window, the sliver of the new moon rose, hazy in the darkening grey.

And then the still world exploded with motion. Behind me the door crashed on its hinges and in stumbled a barrage of injured soldiers. I saw a face ruined by a claw marks. A man missing an eye and a woman missing three fingers carried in another soldier, whose stomach was ribbons. I

almost threw up at the smell that came with them, like hot death, and Marta and I threw our chairs against the wall and stood back.

“They need carts at the gate. This is just the first of them,” a Huntsman told the doctors, but the doctors couldn’t spare medics to go with the carts. The woman with three fingers bandaged her own hand with perfunctory efficiency and headed back out the door.

“—blocked the gate,” a Huntsman reported. “Did it on purpose. All goddamn day they wouldn’t allow a retreat. It was their sick version of playing with us. Mauling a man’s face and leaving him to moan in agony. All we wanted was to get our injured back inside the wall. The number of wolves—”

Marta was no longer at my side. She was sitting beside a soldier on a bed, pressing bandages into his wounds and water into his hand.

I should help too. The thought numbly occurred to me. I looked at Gran, a statue in the storm. I didn’t want to leave her side.

What would Gran do?

I took a deep breath and turned to the closest doctor. “How can I help?”

She looked me quickly up and down. “They need carts at the gate.”

Fear pounded in my throat. I did not want to leave Gran. I did not want to run to the gate where the wolves and the men who fought them waited.

But that’s what Gran would do.

“Where are the carts?”

She pointed.

I left the hospital. There was only one cart left, and I took up its rough wooden handles in my hands. Then I paused.

This cart could carry one, maybe two, men. Outside Flora’s stable there was an old flat-bed that could carry half a dozen. Though the military’s trucks were too wide for the cobblestone streets inside the village, the horse-drawn flat-bed wouldn’t be. Dropping the small cart, I raced towards Flora’s stable.

The streets were empty. Beneath my pounding feet, the village people harbored. I hitched Flora up to the wooden bed as quickly as my fingers would fly through the buckles. I raced her down the road towards the gate. I rounded the track, my heart pounding.

The gate was closed. I pulled up as close as I could and shouted to get all the injured in my cart, as many as could fit. It took only minutes to fill the bed. But the hospital where Gran lay was too full to take them, and

redirected me to the hospital in the eastern quarter instead. I ferried men until there were no more alive to ferry, and then they sent me for other things. Supplies. Beds and blankets from local houses. Just break down doors and take what was needed. It was a night of no thought and frenzied action, and it was better that way. I was shaking in exhaustion by the time the sun rose to lighten the sky. I pressed down my sweaty curls and I took a deep breath of the dewy dawn air.

Nearby, a wolf howled.

Under my skin ran cold ice-crystal blood. The sound was too close.

Then I heard the screaming. From my left, and from my right, and behind and ahead. "They're inside the wall," I whispered to no one.

The wolves surrounded me.

They had taken our city.

Without thought, I unhitched Flora from the cart and got on her back. I left the cart behind, riding west towards the hospital where I left Marta and Gran. It took ages, for I turned to avoid the screams.

When I reached the hospital, I saw the broken bodies of Huntsmen scattered in pieces. For the second time since all this started, I had to fight not to vomit. Inside the door, patients and doctors lay like fallen dolls on the wooden floor. The massive footprints of wolves were everywhere, carved in slick wet blood. Bodies were ripped open and legs torn off, and I wanted to not look. But I had to look. I had to look for Marta and Gran.

I went to Gran's bed first. A sheet was pulled high over the body on top, and I tore it off.

There she was. Shallow breath in, shallow breath out. Pale as before, and still oozing into her bandage.

My knees collapsed and I took gulping breaths, willing the world to stop whirring.

Why was she covered as if dead?

To hide her, perhaps. If a wolf were to recognize the Supreme General, he'd certainly kill her first.

Who would think of something like that?

Marta.

Where was Marta?

I weeded through the dead, searching the faces of the fallen. With careful steps I crossed the room. Not her. Not her. I got to the water pumps

on the far end of the hospital and none of them were her. Marta was nowhere. Gone.

I checked the bodies outside, making a wider and wider circle until it brought me too close to screaming and I retreated back to Gran's side. I picked up an axe from the floor and I held it in my hand. With my other, I reached for Gran.

"Live," I commanded. "You have to live."

Night came with another narrow moon, and the screaming stopped. I think I dozed in my chair, but I woke when the hinges creaked on the hospital's double doors. Silent, I raised my axe and squinted my eyes. The figure in the door lifted a lantern to illuminate a tired, dirty face.

"Colonel Leanna!"

She twisted to peer at me, and I swear she almost smiled. "Red. I thought I'd find you with your Gran." She picked through the bodies and drew up a chair next to mine. "How's she doing?"

"She's hanging on."

Leanna sat down heavily. Her leathers were slick with blood and sweat. Thick droplets fell from her axe.

"What time is it?"

"It's about midnight, Red."

"Colonel, what's going on out there? If you're here..."

"It's over. The wolves are gone."

I breathed out a gigantic sigh.

The colonel sighed too, though I wasn't sure it was relief. "Look, Red, I'm here for one reason. I was looking for you." She paused for a long time, and then the words flowed from her quickly. "There is a flower in the Woods. We call it Salvia acania. This flower has healing properties when boiled or crushed into a paste. It aids in the treatment of infections and it helps stop bleeding, but it only grows wild; we've had no success fostering it here. We keep a supply, of course, but tonight the wolves destroyed it.

"I believe this flower could save your Gran's life, and the lives of many others. To be frank, I need it. And I do not have the men to go get it. Every Huntsman in the force is needed elsewhere. But as it could save your Gran, I was hoping you might volunteer to go into the Woods to collect it."

My heart dropped to my stomach. "I—I've never been in the Woods."

“We’ll draw you a map. You can take your horse. The flower grows best in a clearing only a few hours ride from the gate. You could leave at dawn and be back before dark.”

“But—won’t the wolves kill me as soon as I step outside the gate? It’s not safe—”

“The battle is over, Red. The wolves, like us, took massive casualties. We believe they are nursing their wounds as we are, with severely depleted numbers.”

“But—how? Just a few hours ago they were *inside the village*. ”

Colonel Leanna sighed. She leaned forward in her chair and allowed her head to rest in her hands for just a moment. Her axe clattered to the floor. For a moment she was not a colonel; she was just a woman. She reminded me of Gran after a long patrol.

“We executed your Gran’s plan,” she said. “We went out to meet them in the Woods. It was a mistake. My mistake. There were hoards of them, more than we’ve ever seen. They cut off our retreat. Tortured us, carrying soldiers into the Woods only to drag them back again. It didn’t make any sense. Just before night fell, they disappeared and allowed us to open the gate.”

In the darkness they are truly sinister, Gran had said. *You do not wish to meet a wolf after dark.*

“We retreated inside the wall. I guarded the gate with our remaining men and I thought it was over. But when day broke...” She shuddered and leaned back in her chair. She seemed lost in thought, as if she’d forgotten me. Eventually she remembered. Now her voice was brusque. Businesslike.

“When day broke, we found there were wolves inside the wall. More than a dozen of them snuck in with our men during the retreat.”

“That makes no sense. How—”

She spoke over me, disregarding my question. “They went for the hospitals, and they tried to get into the bunkers. The bunkers held. The hospitals...”

I couldn’t process it all. Some of it hardly made sense. How did wolves sneak unseen through the gate? How had we won against such numbers and after so much time? And how, now, was I seriously supposed to believe it was safe out there?

“My friend Marta. She was here, but I can’t find her body.”

Colonel Leanna looked a thousand years old. “She could be dead. But witnesses also saw the wolves taking women with them when they left the village. You know how they are.”

“Yes.” I knew the old stories. But the stories never told what they did with the women, after they took them.

I felt sick. Was it worse than Marta being dead? I didn’t know.

What would Gran do? I knew the answer. But I was not Gran. Gran was never a helpless girl venturing alone into the pathless Woods.

“The wolves will kill me,” I said.

“They won’t.”

“They will.”

“*They won’t.*” She sounded like a colonel again, decisive and sure. How could she send me on this mission if she wasn’t?

And yet, it was nearly impossible to believe she was right. In my imagination, the wolves lurked just outside the gate, watching us, as always. How could I believe they would simply let me pick a flower and come home?

But Colonel Leanna knew more than I did, and she thought I would be safe.

I knew nothing of the wolves, or of this situation. I knew only that Gran might die if I didn’t go. That I might never find out what happened to Marta if I didn’t go.

I looked Colonel Leanna in the eye, and I tried to summon up that raised-chin look that Gran always wore with such confidence. “You’re *sure* they won’t just kill me or take me as soon as I step outside the gate?”

Leanna looked so tired. Her eyes shifted away, not wanting to meet mine. “No, Red. I can’t promise I’m sure of that. But I’m sure it’s worth the risk. I’m sure I need you. I wouldn’t send Gran’s granddaughter if I didn’t. I wouldn’t do that to her.”

It was not the answer I wanted. But perhaps the answer I wanted was naive, and Leanna did not want to lie.

The truth was that going was the only thing I could do to help the two people I loved most. I had no other choice, except to sit here and lose everything. I had to believe that the woman Gran had appointed as her second would not send me to my death. I had to take the chance.

“Okay, I’ll go. I’ll go into the Woods.”

Colonel Leanna's shoulders relaxed. She closed her eyes, and for a moment gratitude warred with something else on her face. Then the expression was gone and she stood. She reached down for her axe and she walked towards the door. "I'll send someone to outfit you and teach you what you're looking for. You leave at first light."

6

“GOOD LUCK,” THE Huntsman said. Then his face disappeared, and I watched as the gate rolled slowly shut behind me.

I sat on Flora’s back and shivered. The land beyond the wall was clear of trees and brush. The Huntsmen kept it that way to avoid being ambushed by wolves cowering behind the ancient pines. Today, the clearing was covered in blood. Stray fingers, arms, feet, lay scattered about the crisp dead grass. Low branches had snapped off the closest trees; the tree limbs lay alongside the human ones. Behind the shadow of one tree, I could see the shape of a fallen giant—a wolf the Huntsmen had managed to kill. Even in death, its size was massive, and I feared that it might suddenly open one of those big yellow eyes and stand back up.

Otherwise the Woods were empty. No Huntsmen patrolled today; no Huntsmen guarded the wall on this side. Small sounds reached me, the scratches of tiny animals going about their everyday business. I jumped at every one. A leaf crunched and I started, making Flora shift and whinny. She was nervous too; all she’d ever felt underfoot was cement and stone. But so far no eyes peeked out at us through the sunlit trees.

I looked at the sun still rising behind the orange foliage. It would be a chilly but clear day, and most of it lay before me. Plenty of time for me to gather the flowers into my basket and return home by dark.

Before me lay the path of the Huntsmen. Clear of green growth and fallen detritus, it was wide enough for them to take their trucks through, a half dozen men with their axes manning all sides of the bed. I started down the path.

Ride until a stream cuts the path. You’ll see a bridge, but do not cross it. Instead turn left and follow the stream until you reach a sheer face of rock in your path. This is what Leanna’s guide told me, and so it is what I did. I walked Flora down the path until we reached the creek. Before me I held

the map he'd drawn, a simple sketch with the path I was to follow, and a drawing of the flower beside it. In a small pack on Flora's side I carried water, bread and cheese, carrots, and a basket for gathering flowers.

I wore a Huntsman's uniform for the very first time: a white shirt and high-cut brown leather pants, with boots that came to my knees. I felt like a little girl dressed up in a costume. The leather pants, tight as a second skin and without an ounce of stretch, tugged at the seams as I sat astride Flora. The sleeves of the shirt bunched beneath my jacket sleeves. The straps of the axe holster dug into the tender skin of my armpits, though my jacket helped prevent chafing. I'd refused to don the standard issue brown coat, and rushed to pull Gran's familiar red jacket back on as soon as I was dressed. At least if I buttoned it up, I still recognized myself from the waist up when I looked in the mirror.

"Is there anything else I should know before I go in?" I had asked my guide. He stood with me by the gate as we waited for the climbing rays of first light.

"I tell every new recruit before their first time out to just not get distracted. It's a whole other world out there. It'll try to enchant you. You get caught up looking at a cute critter or a pretty flower and the next thing you know, you're dead. Stay vigilant. Beneath the loveliness is danger, Red. Don't ever forget it."

I allowed Flora a drink at the stream. Ahead on the path, the bridge beckoned. The straight path continued, wide and tamed. I remounted and turned Flora left.

This was tougher going, for the Huntsmen had not come through here with their axes and taken the wild out of it. I guided Flora carefully around the roots and brambles that rose to block our way.

Once I reached the cliff face, it was time to leave Flora. Here, my guide said, I should cross the stream at its shallowest point and dive into the dense patch of woods on the other side. The shrubs here were too close together, the branches of the trees too low, for a horse to pass through. It was the part I was most nervous about. What if something happened to Flora while I was gone?

"Shhh, girl, it's okay," I said as I tied her reins to a tree. She shifted on her feet, glancing left and right. I pulled a carrot from her pack and fed it to her, promising to return soon. I retrieved my basket and took my first slow, careful steps alone into the deep Woods.

The stream was so dry that I barely wet my boots in crossing. My guide was right—the branches here were low and numerous, though brittle with age and deadness. They snapped and dropped by my feet as I passed, each new crack startling me. It occurred to me that at least it would be impossible for a wolf to sneak up on me here. If Flora couldn't fit, a wolf couldn't either. After that I walked faster, and with more confidence. I had to be almost there...

Then I saw my first flower. A small plant, low to the ground, it barely peeked its blue petals above the cover of fallen leaves. I pounced on it and cleared the space around it. Yes, it had five petals, and a fuzzy yellow center inside them. The stem was green with black spots, and the leaves had three points. It was definitely *Salvia acania*.

Ruthlessly, I plucked it from the ground. I stuffed the flower eagerly into my basket. At the base of a tree, I saw another hint of blue. I rushed to it, barely standing all the way up, and I plucked that too. I crawled through the trees that way, my eyes darting in search of hidden color. At each discovery, I pounced and gathered the treasure into my stash.

My back ached by the time I stood again. Every time I'd think I had enough, I'd see another, and I'd think of all the people carried into the hospital to lie beside my Gran as my guide drew his map. Perhaps another flower could save another of them. I didn't stop until my basket was full.

Only then did I look up. Beside me was a small furry creature collecting an acorn. Above us, the sun was dropping, and I judged it to be late afternoon. It would be nearly dusk when I reached the gate.

I retraced my steps. I'd crawled quite a distance as I filled my basket. At least it was easy to see where the ground cover was disturbed, wet decaying leaves laying on top of the dry. It was harder to tell where I'd walked, and it occurred to me that I'd not thought to mark the trail with anything to help me find my way back. I stopped and stood in the Woods. An eerie silence pulsed around me, empty of breeze and creatures.

The gate faced west. I'd traveled west, then turned south, and then west again after the stream. The sun set in the west. So if I walked away from the sun, I'd find my way back to Flora. After that I could follow the stream, and the path, and I'd be okay. I began to walk again and my foot kicked a fallen branch. There were many ahead of me, littered on the ground. Yes, this was the way I'd come. I quickened my pace.

I found the stream, and Flora waiting unharmed just on the other side of it. I stuffed my basket into Flora's pack and mounted up. She pined for a carrot, but I felt a rising need to get back and resolved to give her love and attention just as soon as I got these flowers to Gran's doctors.

Back we went, retracing our steps.

Follow the creek to the bridge, and then turn right. Now we were once more on the path. I thought warmly of food, and a bath, and the chance to sit with Gran as she woke up. I urged Flora on, cantering confidently towards the village.

The sky was turning pink when the wall came into sight. I'd never seen it from this side before. The ancient wooden gate looked only half there with no winch to turn, no dangling chain, no iron bar to lock. All around it spanned the darkness of the iron thorns. Rusting with age, they jutted their threatening points towards my face.

Flora and I approached the gate.

I knocked heavily with the iron knocker. I picked up the call box and spoke to the Huntsmen inside. "It's Red returning with the flowers." I waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Had something happened in the village to draw the Huntsmen away from the gate? Perhaps another attack?

I knocked again. "It's Red! Let me in!"

Behind my back the sun descended. The orange orb lit up the red-orange leaves, making a neon world. Soon though, black would descend to cover everything.

I pounded the gate again. Then I kept pounding, slamming on the wood with my fists and screaming as loudly as I could. "Let me in! Let me in! I'm out here! Let me in!"

But nobody came. Nobody came to open the gate and let me into the village.

Beneath my unanswered knocking fist, the towering wall transformed into something new. It was not a blanket of safety; it was a weapon for piercing skulls and murdering giant monsters. It was a method of control, a way to keep out everything unwanted. There was no way in except to be allowed in.

I took my axe from my back and I crashed its metal against the iron reinforcements on the door. “Let me in! Let me in now! It’s getting dark...”

But there was nothing. No movement of the gate to allow my return.

“Shh, Flora,” I whispered. “It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.” My eyes darted to see if it was.

The sun was below the canopy now, and in a moment it would pass beyond the horizon. It was hard to know what might be hiding in the constant movement of the forest. The branches of every tree waved in the wind, stirring fallen and hanging leaves both. They blew around Flora’s feet like so many little living critters. My eyes caught on the rotting human body parts, on the bugs crawling across them, and I fought down terror.

Shelter. I needed some kind of safe shelter for the night. I had no idea how to find one. I wished suddenly I had thought to ask practical questions of my Huntsman friends while we sat with our beers. Instead, their scary stories came to the forefront of my mind and terrified me more.

Quiet and far away, a howl sounded from inside the trees. The wolves were out, and I was trapped on the side with the thorns.

7

I LINGERED AT the gate as the night darkened. Above me the stars came out, a thousand pinpricks of brightness in a deep blue sky. The moon was just a sliver, barely enough to light the ground. I imagined curling up here to sleep and wait for the gate to open. I'd be exposed to any eyes hiding in the trees. No, I would have to find shelter.

Before me the path of the Huntsmen disappeared into the Woods. I'd been that way; there was no shelter close enough on the road I'd traveled. But the road branched to follow along the curve of the wall. These branches would lead to guard stations. I knew there was a big one where the river entered the village. It protected our access to our water supply and might still be manned.

I turned Flora northward and cantered down the wide dirt road. It mirrored the gate road so familiar to me on the inside, but the world I circled now was not white and smooth. The pointed shadows of the thorns, each long as my arm, reached for me while in the trees, small bright eyes blinked at me and hooted.

The station was dark when I reached it. Through the barred windows there was only night. I slid from Flora's back and rushed to the door. I banged upon it, screaming for shelter. I tore at the door handle, imagining I could rip it from its locks and hinges. It didn't budge. Just beside the station, the river flowed steadily. Wishing for more light, I approached its bank and peered at the holes in the wall that allowed the water entry. Iron bars protected every opening. On the far bank, an identical station stood guard in darkness. I could try to cross the river, but I would only find another locked door.

I retreated to Flora and retraced my steps. I no longer rushed around the track, for there was nowhere I was going. I cast my thoughts into the

wilderness and let them wander. A lifetime at Gran's side and a habit of drinking at The Rusty Axeman must've taught me something I could use.

"Please, let me think of something," I whispered to no one. Then in my mind, an image formed of the tight, tangled forest near the flowers. Too dense for a wolf to approach, I'd thought this morning. It was time to test my theory.

I arrived back at the gate. For good measure, I knocked once more and called into the speaker box. The same emptiness answered as before, and I dismounted Flora and pulled my basket from the pack on her side. It had opened and tipped some of its flowers out to lie crushed amongst Flora's carrots and my empty water jug. Still, there were half a hundred in the basket, and I placed it on the ground before the gate.

"The *Salvia acania* is out here. Get it to my Gran," I said into the speaker. I didn't know why.

Then I remounted Flora and I rode into the Woods. A new crowd peeked at me through the trees. At every twitter, every glowing set of eyes, I startled and breathed harder. But none of the eyes that watched me were big enough to belong to a wolf. None towered above my head, flashing teeth.

We came to the Huntsmen's bridge. On the far side of it, darkness claimed the Woods.

You do not wish to meet a wolf after dark.

I turned Flora left and guided her carefully; I couldn't have her stumbling on the rocky edge of the stream. I counted eternities as we walked slowly towards the promise of safety. To my left, a human-shaped shadow formed and then melted away. I blinked tired eyes and thought of Marta. Had she escaped the clutches of her captors and run through these same trees, searching for safety as I did now?

I imagined finding her. We would stumble upon each other in the thickly packed trees. She would tell me how she escaped the wolves, and I would hug her and be proud and joyful. We would return to the gate together, and it would open, and inside its protection I would find Gran alive, saved by my basketful of blue flowers.

I laughed out loud. Then, Flora stopped dead. She stared intently into a blank space between the trees. She whinnied nervously and began to shake her head, backing away.

"Shh, girl, shh." I tried to calm her, but her eyes were wild with terror and she would not listen to me. She bucked against my reins, refusing to go

forward. "Okay. We'll go back." I began to wheel her around. But as we turned and her eyes sighted a new patch of trees, she whinnied and jumped back, and the tiny pebbles of the creek's edge gave way under her hooves. Quickly she moved her feet, trying to correct her footing, but she slipped and her body twisted under me. Never had she thrown me before, not in five years of almost daily rides. But now I slid down her back. I crashed hard into the jagged edge of the riverbed.

"Flora!" I twisted in the shallows, tracking her body. She was in the creek, running across to the other side. "Flora, come back!" But she was gone now, over the river and into the trees. At least she was okay; at least she could run.

I stood up. The quick-flowing water was only ankle deep, but it was enough to soak my feet through the leather of my boots. Feeling my way blind, I grasped at the rocks at the water's edge. With careful footing, I climbed out of the stream. I stood dripping and shivering, looking after the disappeared shadow of my mount. Exhaustion crept in at the edges of my eyes, and my muscles were shaking. How long was it since I slept through a night?

I could go after her. Try to find her in the night Woods. A part of me wanted to, so that I would not be alone. I could backtrack to the bridge and cross there. Or I could try to cross here, though it was not as dry as the place where I crossed before, and it would be a risk. The smartest thing to do was to keep on as before. The dense trees were not far now; I could walk there and search for Flora in the morning. *Flora, and Marta*. The Woods had stolen from me, and the only thing I could focus on besides survival was stealing back.

I went on slowly, for everywhere there were dangers. The simple, thoughtless menaces of the natural world—bushes with thorns, low branches ready to slam your face, and roots waiting to trip you. I felt with my hands as I walked with only the sound of the trickling stream to guide my direction. Flora had seen something that scared her. I looked for eyes in the trees.

I did not have to wait long to see my first pair. Round blue orbs, bright in the darkness. And above them in the moonlight, a set of pointed ears. I stopped frozen, seeping fear. They were so close, watching from the nearest trees. How had I not seen them sooner? But I'd been looking above my

head and these were low to the ground. The wolf must be crouching, ready to pounce.

Ahead, the body of a small wolf moved from behind a tree and came into the light. Silently she stepped across the leaf litter. Every movement of her limbs was fur over molten steel.

Another blinking set of lights, these a pale grey, appeared beside another tree. Behind a bush, a brown tail flicked.

Panic dried my throat. My mind buzzed with empty static. I was a statue, my breaths quick and shallow. And the next moment I was a blur. I darted into a section of trees with no eyes.

Invisible roots rose to trip me. Leaves welcomed me, loud and dry as they slapped my face. The sound gave away the direction of my retreat. The moon lit the world for the animals, but she was not enough light for me. Blind and alone, I felt the foreignness of the Woods and I knew that it too was my enemy.

Leaves crackled behind me. I spun my head backwards and counted the monsters. How could so many of them fit between the trees?

A low growl vibrated in the air. It started in one place and spread until it came from every direction. A low, ominous noise in the back of the throat, it expressed hunger and promise and power. My legs moved on their own until I miscalculated my path and slammed my face into the cutting bark of a tree. I twisted to see my followers.

What was that hard shape pressing painfully on my spine? My axe! I'd forgotten it. My fingers fumbled behind my back. I'd never drawn it from its holster before.

The circle closed around me. I raised the axe above me with both hands, my heart pumping but my head clear. I felt both powerful and helpless, more alive than ever in the moment before I would likely die.

The wolves were out of the shadows now. They formed a circle around me and stopped, waiting. Each of them was smaller than I'd ever seen or heard about—were they pups? I did not lower my axe.

One of the wolves looked away from me. Her ears flattened and she growled. The others took up the call, and the sound scraped at my bones and nerves until I was raw. Only when they stopped did I hear a new sound: the screaming of a man.

It was a warrior's scream, a battle cry. I looked towards the sound and saw the owner of the voice running through the trees towards us. In one

hand was a burning torch, and in the other, an axe.

Another battle cry, this one approaching from another direction. Was there also a third?

The man I could see raced with insane speed through the dark. He jumped roots as if he already knew where they were. He carved his path around the trees like he'd run these woods a thousand times before. He whooped and screamed at the wolves to go away, leave me alone.

The second man came into view. And oh, it was another Huntsman, come with fiery brand and shining axe. A third followed too, this one making his way with no light, an axe in each hand.

All around me, blue and grey and green eyes disappeared back into the trees. Angry growls faded in volume.

My knees gave way and I sank to the ground. I breathed the cold night air in deep, gulping breaths and I tried to stop shaking.

The first man reached me, and he held his torch forward to see my face.

The other Huntsmen arrived too, and stood on either side of the first man. I was surrounded by protection, men on three sides and the tree behind.

"Thank you," I said.

"Tell me your name." The voice was deep and scratchy, with a strange accent I'd never heard.

"They call me Red."

The man leaned forward and studied my face more closely with his torch. The way he held it, I couldn't see his face, or the faces of the men who stood with him, but the leathers of their Huntsmen uniforms looked aged and well-worn. They must be older, experienced. They had to be, with the familiar way they'd run through these trees. His torch roved over my body, illuminating my heirloom leather jacket.

Suddenly I felt like I should stand up. I put my hands behind me and used them to climb myself up the tree until I stood, leaning on it for strength. Once I stood, I saw that the man was not much taller than I was, although I still could not see his face.

"Come with us."

With a quick turn, he walked away. His men followed after him, and darkness descended quickly in their wake.

"Wait!" I pushed myself off the tree and stumbled after them. I rushed to catch up, and I tripped on the first root I came to. My face slammed into

the base of a tree before I could put out my arms to catch myself, and my chin throbbed with the punch. Instinctively I put up a dirty hand to touch my injury, and it came away wet, my face stinging.

But at least the Huntsman turned back. He held his torch steady above his head, waiting for me to rise.

“Thanks,” I said. The Huntsman didn’t answer.

I started to walk again, and the Huntsman fell into step just before me. He cast his torchlight so that it lit the world up for me too.

“I thought there were no patrols out tonight. I went to River Station and it was abandoned. Did you guys get locked out too?”

No answer.

“What’s your name?”

“Shh,” the man holding my torchlight said.

Prickling crept along my skin, accompanied by a rising uneasiness.

“Hey, could we sit for a moment? I’m so tired.”

“We’re nearly there.” He stepped aside and gestured for me to go ahead of him. His men passed him too, and stepped ahead of me with their torch.

My indistinct sense of danger rose higher as I stepped between them. Shouldn’t I feel safer, surrounded by Huntsmen?

Perhaps they were outlaws—Huntsmen who’d defected to live in the Woods. Perhaps they would hurt me in the way men sometimes did.

But they’d rescued me from the wolves.

My axe was in my hand. I clenched and unclenched my fist around its handle. I studied the shapes ahead of me and saw nothing unusual in the uniformed figures. What could I do but follow them? Like a hot surge through my blood, I felt shame at my own weak helplessness. My chin throbbed, my muscles shook, and I couldn’t take my eyes off the ground for more than a moment or I tripped. I walked meekly between my rescuers because I had no choice.

We were not nearly there. At least not “near” by any measure of mine. We walked for what felt like half the night before I saw the stumps of cut trees. A clearing lay ahead, and in the clearing were several ancient cottages. The thatched roofs were moldy and full of holes. A small stone well had lost its bucket and half the stones had fallen into a cluster on the ground. There were no lights and no noise. It gave the appearance of being a perfectly dead place. Old and rotting and forgotten.

The man in front went to one of the cottages and pushed open its creaking door. “You can rest in here.”

I came forward and peered inside. The torchlight did not reach far enough to light it up. Leaning in, I could smell the moldy rushes and the staleness of the air.

“I’m good out here, actually. The fresh air is good for me.”

We were not on the path towards Big Village. I felt sure now, for I’d seen not a single sign of a true path in all our time walking. More than that, no one from Big Village would ever stay here. Perhaps at one time it had been used by the Huntsmen, but not in ages. No, these men had taken me off the path and deeper into the Woods, and now they wanted to shut me up in a room that felt more like a grave.

I took a step backwards.

Immediately, I felt a large hand grip my arm. It squeezed hard and I cried out, and sharp nails dug in to hurt me more. If not for the leather covering my skin, I would have bled.

“Get in,” the man growled, and he threw me inside the cottage as if I was a bag of flour. I stumbled but did not fall as the men flowed in behind me. I could finally see them clearly.

The first to enter was short, with dark clipped hair and shoulders that bulged too big for his leathers. In fact, his coat was not only too tight, but too short too, and I knew suddenly that it had never been given to him, but taken. Perhaps the tightness made it uncomfortable, for as soon as he stepped inside, he took it off. On his left bicep, a tattoo stood out, lined boldly with black ink. It was the image of a tree with thick foliage. Its roots stretched wide, reaching down and around and up to touch its leaves. The man kept glancing out the open door, his brows low over what looked like yellow eyes. Beneath his short hair I could see his ears had pointed tips.

The second man to enter was the man with the strangely accented voice. Long hair swept his shoulders in perfect yellow curls. They surrounded his head like a mane. His eyes too were yellow, but I could not see his ears.

The third man was monstrously tall. His blond hair was shaved close, but his face bore such a resemblance to the second man’s that I suspected the hair would curl if allowed to grow long. This man’s muscles were so large that they too were tight in his Huntsman’s coat, although he had one sized to fit him. Beneath the white shirt, hair curled on his upper chest. His

eyes were yellow and his ears pointed. When he bared his teeth at me in an attempt at a smile, I saw a flash of pointed white.

“Who are you?” My voice wavered, but I thought it was brave anyway to speak with all of them standing there in a line before the door.

The man in the center, with the long yellow hair and the strange accent, was once more the one to speak. His scratchy voice ran over me like nails. “We are your rescuers. Don’t you remember?” He smiled, showing pointed teeth.

I stayed silent. It was true, and yet not true, and we all knew it.

He stepped forward and I wished the wall would evaporate. “We can’t have a daughter of the village alone and in distress.”

“Please let me go.” I clenched and unclenched my hands around my axe. I watched the man look down at it and then dismiss it as nothing. In my hands, it was nothing.

He laughed. “Let’s go, men. We have a false trail to lay.”

My heart raced, defeat laced with hope, as the short man exited the door, followed by the tall man, and then the leader was grasping the handle.

“Enjoy your day.” His smile was honey and broken glass. He pulled the door closed, and I rushed towards it as fast as I could, but the latch was in place and the lock turned before I reached it. I shook the door handle in my trembling hands, and then I leaned against it and breathed loudly in frustration and relief.

Enjoy your day, he’d said. Implying they would not be back tonight or tomorrow? I had no food and no water. The rotting smell was enough to almost make me forget I was hungry.

There were no windows, and only a thin strip of moonlight showed in a line below the door. The pinpricks of a few stars peeked through a hole in the decaying roof. I holstered my axe and put out my fingers, exploring my prison with my hands.

The single room was mostly empty. There was a counter where food had once been prepared. An empty basin. An ancient bedroll on the floor in the corner, covered in mouse droppings. In another corner I found a pile of stinking rotten meat: the half-decayed carcasses of rats and rabbits, their fur matted with blood and their bones sharp and broken. I wiped my hands on the walls until my skin was raw.

I looked up at the roof once more. The beams were solid, and I could probably squeeze between them. If only I could get up there...but the tallest

thing in the room was the kitchen counter, which was anchored to the floor nowhere near the hole in the thrushes. I climbed up on it anyway and reached for the beams above my head. I jumped and tried to grab one, but my fingers slipped from the wood. If I was someone else, perhaps I could hold on, and I could shimmy across the room towards the hole in the thrushes, or use my axe to make a new hole above my head. Instead I got down from the counter. But perhaps I could still use my axe to get out of this.

I went to the thick door. It seemed impenetrable, but what did I know? I held my axe in both hands. Then I brought it down on the latch. It ricocheted off the metal and I swore, dodging its wild path. I'd try the door itself then. I slammed my blade into the wood. A shallow cut appeared, and I spent minutes prying my blade back out from it. I tried to hit the same place again, but couldn't. I forgave myself for that, reasoning I'd need a big hole anyway. If I kept at it all night, I'd make it out. I ignored the dryness in my throat and the rolling thunder in my stomach.

I banged at the door with my axe until my arms shook. Until blisters raised on the palms of my hands, and my tired, red fingers slipped off the handle and the axe fell to the floor. I took deep gulping breaths and wished for water. I wiped frizzing strands of hair off my forehead. Then I collapsed and sat with my back against the counter, and tried not to be angry with myself. The door was a pulverized mess on its surface, but not even a sliver of light showed through from the outside. Tears leaked down my cheeks. I'd failed.

8

I SAT AWAKE for hours. I did not wipe the tears that rolled down my face. I felt exhausted and wildly awake at the same time. Perhaps in a few hours, I would feel strong again, and I could keep hacking at the door.

“Enjoy your day,” the leader had said, and this filled me with a hope that I had time. Perhaps I could still be gone before they returned.

But only hours passed before I heard voices approaching. I stood and strained to hear. Was it them? It must be. Who else?

Heart pounding, I took up a position on the wall beside the door.

The key turned in the lock, but the latch stuck and the door would not open. I heard swearing, and then knocking, bang bang on the door. I’d inadvertently jammed it when I hit the latch with my axe, and the man was trying to pound it open.

“Don’t come in,” I said quietly. A joke, a begging wish. But they could not hear me, and in the next moment the latch gave way and the door flew away. The short man with the clipped hair entered, his yellow eyes searching for me in the darkness.

With a yell, I sprang from the wall and fell on him from behind. I brought my axe down and cut him across his shoulder. He swore again and spun towards me, but already strong arms were grabbing me from behind, and the axe was pulled from my hand like my grip was nothing. The towering man was back too. He held me inside his huge hands as he threw my axe out the open door.

The short man’s eyes were on fire. He spit on the floor. “Fucking bitch.”

“Let me see.”

The short man turned to show the taller one what I’d done. He now wore no shirt or coat to disguise him, and blood rolled thick and dark down the tree tattoo on his bicep. They’d brought no light with them, and the

taller man peered through the darkness at the wound. He shrugged and said, “It’s not bad. Lucky she doesn’t know how to use that thing.”

“We still shouldn’t have left it with her. Rommel is careless.”

Rommel. That must be the third man, the leader who was not here. He was the one who said, “Enjoy your day.” Had the others returned without telling him, or had he sent them to make sure I didn’t?

I found my voice. “Who are you? What do you want?”

“Let’s just say we need a woman’s touch.”

The short man snorted in laughter and flexed his shoulder muscles, and I knew what was going to happen then. Before it had been scenarios and possibilities and fears, but now, in the clarity of the dark, I knew just what they intended to do to me.

My axe was gone, and they no longer carried axes that I might steal. In fact, neither man wore a shirt now and I wondered how I’d ever thought they were Huntsmen. Not even Huntsmen wore so many scars—the scars of fights won.

Hopelessness rose to drown me. Arms stronger than my legs encircled my body, holding me in place. And now the short man approached me. His hands reached out for the tied cords that held up my leather pants.

“Stop,” I said. “Stop. You don’t know who I am. You don’t know what I could do for you if you return me safely to the village.”

The short man laughed. He stopped and he laughed at me, and then he slapped me across the face. He reached out and he took me from the other man’s grip, bringing me close by the lapels of my leather coat. “Bitch, we know exactly who you are. Why do you think you’re here?”

My head spun. Gran’s old coat. Could that be how they knew?

Hot bad breath against my neck. “It will be a real pleasure to punish your blood.” And then he kicked my legs out from under me and I went down. I banged my swollen face on the dirt floor and felt blood trickle against my eyebrow. I cried out at the sharp, sudden pain, and began to crawl.

Away. Get away.

My haven was the far corner with the rotting meat. Behind me I heard the tall man try to close the door, but the broken latch stopped it. He stood in the opening and watched as the short man followed me across the floor.

The carcasses were nearly under my hands now—the rancid smell of feces and rotting meat cleared my mind. I reached my hand into the filth

and felt for a sharp bone. Skull, leg, decaying rabbit ear...there! A shattered bone, small but piercing sharp. I hid it inside my fist as I felt a hand close on my ankle. I kicked out behind me and he fell, but he only dropped onto me, pinning me down.

He crawled up the back of my body. One strong hand gripped my thigh, and then he was up to my back, and then a thick small hand closed over my shoulder. He was sitting on top of me and I could not roll over or crawl away. He closed a fist in my red-blond hair and he dragged me up off the ground and towards the tall man who waited for us with a face full of hunger. The pain in my scalp felt like tearing. My right eye saw red as the fist in my hair encouraged the gash I'd just earned to gush blood.

The short man held my arms at my sides as the tall man reached down to untie my tight leather pants. Rough hands passed over my skin, pulling my pants down to my knees.

“Stop! Please, stop!”

To my shock, he did. His hands lingered on my thighs, almost gentle.

“Now let me go. Just let me walk out that door and go. You don’t have to do this. Please.”

He hesitated. With aching slowness, he began to move out of the doorway. I felt the hands holding me release. I lifted my foot to take a running step forward, and then the short man slapped his friend across the face, hard. The tall man frowned, growled, refocused his yellow eyes.

“Remember who she is.”

Hunger flooded back to the monster’s eyes. I screamed in rage as the tall man lifted me off my feet and threw me against the far wall, away from the door. He was on me like a blur. His huge fist punched me in the stomach and I doubled over, trying not to vomit. He was ripping at my clothes now. Shirt torn open, pants down, and I could hear the slurred begging of a small high voice and I realized it was me. Tears soaked my cheeks and blurred my vision as the huge hands handled my body and my small hands tried futilely to stop it. Begging turned to screaming, high and loud, an animal in a trap.

I was on the ground and he was above me. I pressed at him, trying to fight. But I did not know how. He was looking down, fiddling with his own pants, and he almost had what he wanted. The small man stood above us and laughed. And then I remembered the bone in my fist. I pushed it out of my hand until I held it like a knife. My hands were on his chest. I brought

them up to his face, I yelled with all my strength, and I shoved the bone spear up into the monster's eye.

A roar filled the room and the weight left my body. He clutched his eye with his hands, and I was forgotten. As fast as I possibly could, I pulled my pants up high enough to run and I went for the door. But the short man caught me. He grabbed me by the front of the neck and he started to squeeze.

First I felt the tightness. The pain, the coughing in my throat as it protested. I heard myself make grotesque sounds, guttural and desperate, and my enemy's sneer grew more satisfied and he squeezed tighter. The world began to swim and my eyes closed. My head was going round and round, and then my knees were gone, turned to jelly, and my hands dangled useless at my sides.

"Your kind, they all deserve to die," he told me.

And then I was on the floor, taking a heavy wheezing breath in, and then another.

"But not yet, bitch. I'm not ready for you to die yet."

"Jay, just kill her," the tall blond man said. He stood clutching his eye. Blood seeped out from between his fingers. "You saw her blood speak. She's dangerous."

"She's a girl with a bone," the dark, tattooed man said. And as they talked, I bolted, running, racing for the open door. I flew through it into the fresh air. My axe lay on the grass, and I scooped it up without stopping. I ran.

I had no light but the moon. I had no knowledge of the Woods.

I stumbled and fell, over and over, scraping my knees even through the thick leather of my ruined pants. Behind me, they came, making no effort to be quiet. Yellow eyes bulged in the darkness when I looked back.

"We'll find you. These are our Woods! Run as fast as you can—it doesn't matter. We'll scent you out and eat you alive!"

The fear was thick in my blood and it kept me moving. I sheathed my axe so that I could catch my falls with both hands. I no longer needed to fight—I needed to be fast and silent. I felt my way through the dark trees like a stranger in a maze. I had no idea in what direction I traveled, but it did not matter as long as it was away. My only marker of time was the exhaustion that trickled in to replace the rush that had flooded me in my moment of terror.

Never in my life had I pushed my body like this, past the brink of endurance and reason. I pressed on anyway. I held my hands out before me and accepted every cut from every thorn. I crawled along the roots and the leaves, searching the rocks I found for hidden caves or eaves where I could hide. I buried a scream as the cold water of a stream stole over my cuts.

I moved until I could not hear them. And then I kept moving.

I stopped finally by a river. Did it flow into the same stream where they found me before? I had no idea where I was anymore.

The lightening grey told me dawn was close. Exhaustion taking me, I collapsed at the side of it and lowered my head for a drink. I tried not to slurp, but to listen. I listened for every sound the Woods offered.

Which ones might be them?

Crunching in the leaves nearby nearly had me standing again before I looked and saw a squirrel. The hooting sounds of animals I couldn't see made me jump, and the flow of the water brought my thirst to the surface. But none of it sounded like a man.

I think I lost them... but even as I thought it, I didn't trust it. And even if it were true, there were other dangers in the Woods. I could not stop here. I had to find a cave, a hiding place.

But I had never felt so broken. I lay by the riverside, wet and bleeding, and I just wished I were home. Silent tears rolled down my cheeks, salty weakness mixing with cool river water and warm red blood. Together, they carved paths through the grime on my cheeks and coated my eyelashes until I could barely see through the fog of wetness.

With every bit of movement, I felt pain. Pain from running too long, too fast. Pain from a million scrapes and bruises. The gash near my hairline throbbed, and my nose felt too big. I was weak, not just from exertion, but from constant pain.

The world began to spin beneath my tears, and I thought that it would be glorious to just close my eyes. In sleep, I would gain a reprieve from the dull pain in my abdomen. From the burning in my knees and the ache in my feet. I would gain a reprieve from the fear, the terrible fear, that had lived in me every moment since I'd stepped outside the Wall of Thorns. I wished to go to sleep and never wake up.

If I faded away in the unprotected open forest, I might get what I wished for. The wolves were bound to find me, or the men would, and then I'd probably wish even more fervently for death. But even as I thought this, I

knew I could not move one more bit, and it was all fruitless anyway, wasn't it? What was a girl like me to do when lost off the path in the Woods? I never stood a chance.

My vision turned black and fuzzy. Sleep came, as unstoppable as the men who trailed me, and I had no fight left in me with which to stop it from carrying me away.

9

I AWOKE TO more pain. A thousand knives impaled my thigh, as if I hung on the Wall of Thorns. I gasped and gulped, in such agony that even air would not obey me as I desperately asked it into my lungs. My eyes were caked closed, and in my nose I scented the iron of my own dried blood. I tuned in to my surroundings and I realized I was being carried. My hands scraped the stony ground and blood pounded in my skull.

I was being held by my leg; that's where most of the pain was. I knew what I would see when I opened my eyes. I lifted my left arm to wipe the grit from my eyes, and pricks of pain shot through my shoulder. Something had happened to it while I was unconscious. I let it drop and used my right arm instead to clear the flecks of dried blood that closed my eyes to the blinding light of daylight. I opened them to see the monstrous teeth buried deep in my leg.

I was inside the mouth of a wolf, his jaws closed on my right thigh. There was no doubt I was prey, a meal, being carried back to his lair, perhaps to be shared with his pack. Pups would feast on me, or maybe he would eat me all himself, saving some for later.

With these thoughts, my fear rose in pitch, but it could not match my pain. My head felt swollen and throbbing, and my leg was in such agony that it was hard to even think. Blood leaked slow but steady from teeth marks through my left shoulder that had pierced both jacket and skin.

I wondered if I still had my axe, and I reached my right arm behind me and felt it. Relief flooded me, followed by resistance to the very idea of fighting. Every part of my body hurt. I had no idea how much bleeding there would be when the wolf put me down. And I barely knew how to use it anyway. Could I really hope to fight this wolf and save my own life? Frankly, passing out again and never waking up felt more appealing.

The yellow eyes of the monster were on me. From one eye, fresh blood flowed from a pinprick in its center. Despite this, I saw merriness and humor at my agony. There was something familiar in this demon beast, and although I couldn't understand it, it caused fury to rise up in me, and suddenly I was not so ready to go meekly to my death.

I reached behind my back and unsnapped the strap holding tight the axe. With a gigantic scream and all the strength I had left in my body, I swung the axe at his head.

With a sound like a wounded dog, his jaws released me and I dropped hard to the ground. Shots of pain exploded up my hip, and I gasped and cried out. Blood was already flowing out, thick and fast.

The wolf was rounding on me. I saw, to my horror, that I'd only hit him in the snout with the side of the axe, and not the blade. The blunt force was enough to get him to release me, but he was entirely uninjured. Fury and shame exploded in me as I lifted onto my palms and tried to slide away from him.

I was going to die because I couldn't wield an axe. Gran would be so ashamed.

The yellow eyes of the wolf contained his fury. He advanced on me slowly, taking his time. He enjoyed watching me struggle and weaken and fail.

He was only feet from me now, and I knew it was over. I cried out in desperate fear and I felt tears soaking my cheeks. It was all about to end.

A fast-moving blur rocketed by at the edge of my vision. Was it Gran, come to save me? The shape crashed into the wolf and tangled with him. Together, they rolled away. Blinking back tears, I saw the snapping of jaws and the intermixing of two shades of grey fur. It was another wolf.

He was probably just trying to steal the meal for himself. But still, I could use the moments he bought me. I inched away from the monsters. If I could find a small hole to hide in, perhaps the wolves would be too big to reach me.

My head was getting hazier. The world faded and then came back. I looked down at my leg, gushing blood from a dozen punctures. Thinking of Gran's arm and my mother's scarf, I tore off my red jacket and I wrapped it around the top of my thigh. I pulled it as tight as I could, though it wasn't very tight. I found a branch just to my side and I used it as a lever. I twisted the leather ruthlessly around my skin. I tied it off in a double knot, and then

I sank onto my back and took breaths. I couldn't see the wolves, though they growled and snapped and fought just on the other side of the bushes.

Suddenly one of the wolves yelped, and then there was the crack of bone. I heard a figure slump, and the other sounds ceased. A howl, long and triumphant, cut through the air.

I passed out.

When I came to, I was somewhere else. Beneath me I felt rushes over a flat bed of stone. Darkness comforted the pain that still throbbed in my head. With great effort, I blinked to open my eyes. I swallowed and tried not to make a sound, but my throat was so dry that every breath was a struggle not to cough.

I was in a cave, and it was day. The same day, or the next day? In the center of the cave, a small fire had burnt down to embers. Someone else had been here—someone human. But how recently? There was no one here now. Beside me sat a cup of water, and I reached for it eagerly until the answering pain made me remember my injuries.

I was afraid to look at my leg. Once I did, I saw I wore no pants. My leg was bandaged with supplies gathered from the Woods. Some kind of mud mixture lay beneath large leaves tied with vine. The wound was no longer bleeding, and I breathed a sigh of deep relief. My shoulder was wrapped similarly, and my forehead was clean but open. I hissed as I touched too close to the gash.

I was wearing my tank top and panties, but no long sleeves, pants, boots, or jacket. Nowhere did I see my clothes either, and I hoped I had not lost Gran's jacket. Thankfully, I'd been provided with a blanket, which I pulled high and wrapped tightly around me. More carefully than before, I reached for the cup of water and downed it gratefully. It felt like bliss sweeping down my throat, and I yearned for more.

I went back to studying my surroundings. Against one wall was a large chest. I considered getting up to search it, but the state of my leg stopped me. My axe was gone, and there were no other weapons I could see. Against another wall, blankets lay crumpled, and fresh rushes waited for their turn. There was nothing else, and I wondered what sort of human lived here. Certainly the cavern was too bare to suggest a Huntsman. Where were the comforts of the village I'd seen them all carry out in their packs?

Slowly, I rose to sit. I had to lift myself using only my right arm, for my left shoulder felt weak and shot lances of agony. I felt nauseous and my

vision spun, and I rested on my elbow halfway up, breathing heavy.

The bed was not raised. It was merely a pile of rushes on the stone floor. To stand, I would need both balance and strength. But what choice did I have? The forest was filled with villains—both men and beasts—and I could not trust that my current captor would not prove to be an evil of another kind. I had to at least try to get out of here.

Inch by inch, I shifted my good leg into place. I clung to the wall, hoping to steady my rise. I let the blanket fall away and my fingertips dig into stone and my muscles shake. Slowly, I climbed. The very slightest weight on my bad leg made me scream out in agony. There were tears on my cheeks when I finally managed to stand, rocking unsteadily. At any moment I might throw up, or fall over, or pass out again. I craved more water and to sleep until I was healed. Instead, I fixed my eyes on the chest and I tried to take a hopping step towards it.

The world collapsed. My hand scraped the wall, and my knee sounded a hard crack as it contacted the hard stone. My head spun me like a child circling a May Day pole, and I cried out in pain and then in frustration and despair. I held no hope of getting up again. I lay where I had fallen and I sobbed.

I sobbed for my Gran, who might be dead by now. I sobbed for Marta, lost and alone in the Woods. I sobbed at the injustice of Colonel Leanna sending me out of the village and then locking its gates. For my lost life, for the trauma and terror of the past few days. And finally, for the pain I was in. Pain like I'd never felt before.

Finally, I stopped sobbing and I crawled back into the bed. I pulled the blanket high around me and I fell asleep. My captor might come back, and they might hurt me. But I was not strong enough to do anything to stop them.

When I woke again, I found a fresh cup of water and a bowl of cold porridge. My bandage had been changed, and the fire crackled and danced, warming the cavern. Outside the sun was up, but the world looked dim and foggy. Dew wet the grass and the air was heavy. It had rained, perhaps, or would rain.

How deeply asleep was I that a stranger could touch my very skin and not wake me? I drank the water and suffered through the porridge. Was it the fire that made it so hot in here? My tongue felt thick and my ears felt

full and I shoved off the blanket and shuddered at the cool air against my bare skin.

I peeled back the bandage on my leg and gaped at the damage. A dozen holes, each half a finger long, stitched closed with twine. I'd seen the wolf's teeth, so I knew how deep these must also be. I touched the swollen red skin and winced. It was so warm. A whole new kind of fear flowed through me.

Dying of infection, alone in this cavern, seemed almost worse than being killed by a wolf. It was so quiet, so invisible. I would just disappear.

My eyes fell again on the large chest, perhaps because it was the only object in the room. It was made of wood, but wore a leather skin. Beautiful craftsmanship, though there was a raw quality to the edges.

Standing was still out of the question, but there might be another way. Using mostly my good leg and arm, I dragged myself across the floor. Freed completely from the blanket's embrace, I shook in the wet fall air and paused at the edge of the fire. I shivered even as I let its dry heat bake my skin. Not good.

I reached the chest. Iron hinges and locking clasp still showed evidence of the hammer hits that sculpted them into shape. I grasped the edge of the lid and tried to lift. To my surprise, it cooperated, and I was able to throw the chest open and peer inside.

My jacket. My axe. With relief and some greed, I pulled them out and put them beside me. Below them I saw my pants and shirt, but they were half in shreds and I left them there. Underneath them lay another pair of pants, the brown leather of a Huntsman's uniform. My blood felt cold as I remembered the other men who wore the uniform but were not Huntsmen. I felt sure this captor wasn't one either. Had he killed for these?

I rifled through the chest's contents. There were several pairs of Huntsmen's pants in slightly varying sizes, and with them several shirts. The shirts were some kind of fabric I'd never seen before; they were not standard issue. No jacket but my own, and not even my boots, but there was an old axe, its wood worn and pocketed but its blade still sharp and clean. I took that too.

In the center there was a divider, and the other side of the chest held a few dishes, a pot, a skillet, and two sets of silverware. Root vegetables lay beside a basketful of nuts. Ordinary household goods, if the household were the simplest in existence.

I lowered the lid back onto the chest. With a grunt of effort, I threw each axe towards my bed, followed by my jacket. Then I crawled to the cavern's entrance. I hugged the wall and inched my head outside, peeking into the seeming emptiness of the Woods. I scanned the trees. No sharp, watching eyes. The usual critters, the noises I already grew used to. It seemed nobody patrolled this open-door prison, but then, they didn't need to. I couldn't even stand. Clenching my teeth at the searing shots of heat from my thigh and shoulder, I dragged myself just a bit outside the wide stone opening. My fingers felt the wet of the grass as I paused once more, waiting for attack. When none came, I relieved myself and then dragged myself back inside.

The fire burned lower now, and I stopped at the pile of wood waiting beside it and placed a piece on top. Then I crawled back to my bed. I hid my jacket under the rushes, against the wall, with one axe beside it. The other axe, I took in my hand. I buried us beneath the blanket, tucking it high against my chin. How was it that as the sun rose higher, it only got colder? I clutched the axe in cold blue fingers and I tried not to fall asleep. I intended to meet my rescuer.

When the fire burned down, I crawled from my nest to tend it, placing wood on top and blowing feebly to wake it again, but it seemed determined to be consumed by the chill, wet fog that crept in from the Woods. My skin was mostly naked, and I wrapped myself tight and suffered the scratchy wool against my throbbing, hot leg. At midday, I ventured back to the chest to take a shirt and a dry pair of socks. I tugged them on with gritted teeth and shaking hands.

It was hard to tell the time as it passed with agonizing slowness. It didn't matter anyway. My rescuer could return at any time—I might wait minutes or days. I closed my eyes and tried to stop the spinning of my vision. I pulled my jacket from its hiding place and observed the damage. Caked in mud and dried blood, the leather was stiff with hardened wrinkles. It no longer looked bright red; instead it was a deep red and brown combined, as if it sought to blend into these dark Woods. I slapped it, hoping to crack the muck off, but I needed water and I had none. I wondered why my captor kept leaving me so little, and how near the closest source was. Even if it was just outside the cavern, it was too far.

I frowned mournfully at the ruined left sleeve. The teeth that punctured my arm had traveled through the leather, and the stitching at the shoulder

was all but gone. Ruined as we both were, I could not slide the jacket on, but I lay it across my chest beneath the blanket, comforted by its connection to my Gran.

What would she do if she were alone and injured out here? She would not give up.

I waited until the dimness of the day grew dimmer. And finally there was rustling in the Woods.

10

I EXPECTED A man. Instead, big yellow eyes approached, high in the fog. Above them, pointed ears nearly grazed the ceiling. His step was so long and so fluid that I knew he could jump the fire and be at my throat before I excavated my axe from its hiding place beneath my blanket.

The wolf stopped just inside the entrance to the cavern, and we stared at each other. My breathing was quick, and my grip tight on my axe, but I knew how weak I still was.

My best option was to use the axe to shield my body. The wolf would pounce on me from across the fire, and I'd bury it in his stomach like Gran had.

But the wolf didn't pounce. Instead he just stood there, staring at me as if he waited for something. Perhaps he saw no reason to rush, given my helpless state. He'd prowl around the fire, careful and measured, and I'd have no hope of surprising him with my hidden axe. What would I do then?

In the background of the Woods, I heard a faraway howl. I shuddered at the sound, at my fear, at the fever that still baked and froze me. Behind the shape of my waiting enemy, the dim world faded to darkness. Gran's words rang in my ears.

In the darkness wolves are truly sinister. You do not wish to meet a wolf after dark.

Soon I would be robbed of the choice.

The sun fell below the horizon, and I felt my heart in my chest. Perhaps soon it would stop beating forever, but in this second it was beating faster than almost ever before. The shadows of trees fell across the wolf's back. The world shrank to include only blue darkness and piercing yellow eyes. Eyes that were...shrinking?

He growled and bared his teeth. I leaned forward, drawn in by a sound that was more pain than threat. His teeth looked smaller too. What was

going on?

The wolf's fur sloughed off his body. It fell to the ground in patches, revealing white skin. His front legs shortened, and he tipped forward, off-balance. I had a sudden strange urge to rush forward and prop him up, before I remembered that I couldn't even stand myself.

Crazy girl, you'll get yourself killed.

But less and less he looked like a monster who might kill me. His teeth were shrinking, pulling back up into his skull until they were barely larger than mine, though still pointed. His light grey fur lay around him in patches on the ground. Except on his head, where it had lengthened and darkened, and now hung like a black, shaggy curtain around his face. A man's face.

Unashamed, my eyes devoured him in the dim light. Lean muscles through his torso, just like any other fit man. But the muscles of his arms and shoulders were bunched and over-sized. I imagined him dropping to his hands and crouching like an animal, and then pouncing. Running on his hands and feet, and it didn't seem crazy. His eyes were still yellow, and his ears still as pointed as his teeth, but the strange features were human-sized.

I dared look lower. For a man, he certainly had a lot of body hair. A thick carpet of dark curls covered most of his chest and continued down his legs. Between his legs were...man-parts. Normal. Human-looking. Not that I even knew what wolf ones looked like.

My cheeks coloring, I climbed my gaze back to his face. He was staring intently at me with yellow eyes. A strong jaw and high cheekbones lent a delicacy to a face framed with dark thick brows. He could be a cousin to the short man I barely escaped alive. And with that thought, I remembered Gran's warning.

In the darkness wolves are truly sinister. You do not wish to meet a wolf after dark.

My fever-sluggish brain put it together.

In the darkness the wolves became men. Beastly, violent men who tricked their prey into opening the door when they knocked, only to devour them later. Was this how they snuck inside the village? It was certainly why I followed them to their prison, thinking them safe.

Yes, such men were more dangerous than wolves.

I squared my shoulders. I stared down the wolf who had made me his captive. Smaller than before he might be, but his teeth were still pointed and his eyes were sharp and clever, and this was his lair I lay in.

“Do you talk? Or do beasts still not talk, even when they masquerade as humans?”

He smiled coldly, and I saw the sharp points of his canines. “Ah, but which is the masquerade?”

What was that supposed to mean?

“So you do talk. Then maybe you can say ‘good day,’ and let me walk out of here right now.”

He gestured to the door with a slight bow and waited, eyebrow raised, to see what I would do.

My heartbeat sped up and I felt irrationally angry that he’d called my bluff. I couldn’t walk out the door. I couldn’t walk at all. I did not know what to make of this creature who’d cared for my wounds, who spoke like an intelligent man rather than a beast transformed. He wasn’t what I expected. And yet, he was still a wolf, and I was still trapped in his cage, shivering and helpless.

“Are you going to kill me?”

The wolf-man studied me carefully with his sharp yellow eyes. He took in my flushed face and my frizzing hair and the shape of my body encased in his blanket. And finally he said: “What’s your name?”

Did that matter to him killing me?

“They call me Red.”

“Ah, an apt nickname. Because of your coat, I imagine. Although it is looking less than its best. Wherever did you get a coat that color?”

I frowned and said nothing. We stared at each other, him naked, me shivering under his blanket.

“Are you going to kill me?” I asked again.

“No.”

Silence. I didn’t know what to say now. Somehow I believed him, although I did not know why.

“What are you going to do with me?”

“If you’ll allow it, I will check your bandages. I will stoke up the fire you have so woefully neglected, and I will feed you.”

I blinked, and I tried to consider. Though it was really a false choice, wasn’t it? I couldn’t leave, and so I had to stay. A worrying prospect, although he hadn’t killed me yet. In fact, he seemed determined to nurse me back to health.

“Why are you helping me?”

“So full of questions. I am helping you because I hope you will help me. Of course, you are only of use if you are who I believe you to be.”

“And who is that?”

“The granddaughter of the Supreme General whose coat you are clutching under that blanket.”

All day I’d sat here in a state of alertness, listening to every sound. Now I needed my wits more than ever and yet I felt the craving for sleep descending like a rope to choke me until I passed out.

Should I confirm his suspicions or deny them? My head spun.

“What—um—what use would I be? What do you want to use me for?”

“That comes later. For now, I’ll settle for you putting aside those axes. Or will you make me wait for you to pass out again?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, but the words came out thick and slurred. I slumped forward a little before shaking myself and sitting up again.

The wolf pierced me with his yellow eyes. They were the same eyes as when he was a wolf. Full of predatory nature and intensity.

“I’ll wait then.”

The wolf-man walked to the chest and threw it open. He reached in for a pair of pants, and donned them. He took a handful of nuts and munched them casually as he put on a shirt. He went outside for a moment and returned wearing a pair of boots and a jacket. I guess he kept them just outside, in the Woods.

It’s like taking off your shoes when you enter your cottage, I thought, and then scolded myself. I was already humanizing him. But he was not human, and I could not let his form trick me into letting down my guard. What could be more sinister than the ability to masquerade as one of us?

I resolved at that moment to never trust this wolf. To never fall for his guise of humanity, for his smooth words and his theater of kindness. He was a wolf in human clothing. And wolves were wolves.

“You can come and dress my wound,” I said, “but I’m not letting go of my axe.” To show I was serious, I pulled it out above the covers and rested it next to me. There it was, just waiting to bury itself in his flesh. I met his eyes with all the determination I could muster.

“Very well. And after I treat your wound I’ll give you some water.”

Water!

My throat was parched and desperate for it. He must know. He'd left me too little on purpose, so that he could use it now to secure my cooperation. If I killed him, I wouldn't get water.

Clever bastard. It wasn't right for a wolf to have this much brains.

He went first to the fire. He nursed the slow dancing glow of embers until the bed of coals flared orange, and then he put on a log and blew. A small flame appeared, and he poked and fiddled, adding kindling, and then he put on another log. When he approached me and knelt on the stone ground, the fire behind him danced high and bright.

The wolf reached out towards me with his human hand and every part of me tensed up. But he only took the edge of the blanket softly into his fingers and peeled it away from me. I felt a flush of embarrassment as I was exposed for him.

I looked into his face, expecting to see the same sick animal lust as in the faces of the other men, the ones whose nature I now knew. But I saw only concentration as he curled the wrap back from my leg and exposed the angry wound beneath.

"It's infected."

"I know. Guess you're not very good at this."

He looked up at my sharp comment, but he didn't seem to take offense. "I'm not," he said mildly. "I've never done it before. Do you know anything of the healing arts?"

I shook my head, irritated at not being able to prove myself better than him. But still there was one thing. "There are blue flowers that grow wild in the Woods. We call them Salvia acania. They fight infection and help stop bleeding."

"I know of them. I don't have any."

"I had some in my horse's pack." A few flowers had escaped my basket to lie discarded and crushed at the bottom of my bag. I'd thought nothing of them. Now they could save my life, if only I still had the pack. "But my horse got spooked and I lost her. I know where they grow. At least, I did."

His fingers were long and narrow, with big knuckles. They reached out like spiders to press at the edges of the stitched punctures. "And how is it that a daughter of the village knows so much of the Woods and the wild plants that grow in them?"

Without waiting for an answer, he stood and left the cavern. He reappeared a few minutes later, carrying a tall bucket of water in one hand,

and Flora's pack in the other.

"Flora! You found her! Is she okay? Did you—eat her?"

He brought the pack to my side. Throwing its flap back, he dug through my things for the crushed blue petals. He held up a handful. "Do you know how they are best used?"

I searched my mind for the memory of Colonel Leanna's explanation. "You have to boil the flowers and use the water. Or crush them and make a paste. I'm not sure what's best, but you can't just rub them on the wound as they are."

His eyes were sharp and interested. He placed a pot from the chest on his fire, and he poured in some water and a handful of flowers. He dug in the pack for the rest and put them in a bowl. He crushed them with his fingertips. Then he brought the bucket with the remaining water to my side.

"Drink. I didn't eat your horse."

Eagerly, I scooped water into the cup he handed me. I downed it and scooped up more. Another cup, and another, until I finally had my fill.

"Use the rest to clean your coat. Get it shining red again."

Gran's jacket—it was so important to him. Part of me wanted to deny his wishes, to keep it hidden close to my skin, but cleaning it and pulling it back over my shoulders where it belonged was what I wanted too.

"If I wet it, it'll ruin it."

Into the chest he went, retrieving a small wrapped package. He tossed it beside me and I opened it curiously. The wrap was made of a large leaf, and inside was a chunk of some kind of oily wax that I could use to recondition the coat after it dried.

So I pulled the mud-covered thing out and dunked it into the bucket of water. I thrust it up and down, and let the little waves soak the mud and wash it away.

"Good. Now take off your shirt."

My instant instinct was refusal. Refusal to strip further before him, to part with one more layer of protection. But I did not want my shoulder wounds to become infected also, and so I reluctantly obeyed him. The wolf bent over me and removed my shoulder bandages.

"This one is healing well," he said. He took the boiling water off the fire.

"So, Flora. You have my horse? She's okay?"

"She seems fine to me. I'm not an expert on horses."

I was exploding with desire to see her. Pet her. To comfort myself with the familiarity of her smell. “She’s here?”

“She’s outside. I’ll carry you out to see her after dinner.”

A kindness. But all I could think was whether she’d been here the whole time. If I had searched the Woods just a bit harder, could I have found her and escaped?

I imagined trying to mount up in my current condition. It was a joke.

The wolf went outside and returned once more, this time bringing in a rabbit, which he skinned and set to roasting. Root vegetables came out of the chest and went into the fire too.

When was my last meal? I could not even remember.

“Why are you doing this?”

“I’ve already answered that. Please don’t waste my time by asking me questions twice.”

Had I really already asked him? Oh yeah, he’d said he was doing it so I’d help him next.

“What do you need help with?”

“Nothing yet. You’re no help to anybody. How’s the jacket?”

The jacket again. I swirled it a final time and then lifted it, with effort, from the bucket. Gently I squeezed out the excess water.

“So you’re really interested in Gran, huh?”

“Yes. What is most interesting is the question of what could have caused her to strand her own granddaughter outside her precious wall.”

Maybe he needed me as a hostage. Perhaps he planned to bargain with Gran—my life in exchange for some other sacrifice.

“If you’re hoping she’ll trade you something to get me back, you’re wrong.”

The wolf laughed. “The Supreme General would do anything to get you back. She started a war to save your mother’s life. Yet here you are. Puzzling.”

Gran started a war to save my mom?! When? How did this wolf know things about Gran that I didn’t? Then again, Gran never even told me the wolves became men at night. There was so much she’d kept hidden behind the striped uniform of the Supreme General.

“She won’t trade for me because she can’t. She was injured in your attack on the village. She’s not in command.”

The wolf sat back on his heels. “Injured how?”

“A wolf took her arm off.” The words came out clipped and angry. Accompanying them was a vision from memory that I did not want to think about.

But his eyes were fire, sparking with excitement.

Rage and hatred formed a pit in my stomach. I shouldn’t have told him. I shouldn’t tell him anything at all.

The wolf looked at the flowers in the bowl in his hand. By now they were a wet powder, and his fingertips were coated in blue. “That put... hmm, let’s see...Colonel Leanna in charge—isn’t that right? And Colonel Leanna sent a naive, sheltered girl into the Woods to gather flowers.”

I said nothing. I was done talking.

The boiled water was cool. He brought it to me along with fresh leaves and twine. The wolf poured the water slowly over my thigh. He mixed a bit of water with his flower powder and spread the thick paste along my punctures. I clenched my teeth in agony at his touch. He did not acknowledge my pain, only kept going about his work. He dipped the leaves in the flower-water, and then pressed them to my leg and wrapped the twine. He poured the remainder of the water on my shoulder, soaking my tank top and making me shiver further. He re-bandaged my shoulder, and then put another log on the fire. He took off his jacket and handed it to me. In his thin linen shirt, his shoulders and upper arms looked massive. Ashamed at my gratitude, I shrugged it on and re-buried myself in my blanket. I’d never felt so helpless, and I’d never needed so badly to be a warrior. What could I do to save myself?

I could learn.

“Do all wolves look like men during the night?”

“Look like?”

“Yes, look like.”

“We are wolves in daylight and men under the light of the moon.”

“Why not the other way around?”

“Why should it be the other way around?”

“Wolves howl at the moon,” I said lamely. I did not want to tell him the real reason: it was always that way in the fairy tale stories.

The wolf said nothing and I pressed on.

“Were you the wolf that fought that other wolf and won? The next thing I knew I woke up here.”

“Yes.”

“Who was he?”

“He was one of the men who took you.”

I’d already suspected it. In that wolf’s eyes, there had been something that was so familiar. And a bleeding pinprick hole, like the wound from a rat’s bone. “I know, but who were they?”

He shook his head, declining to answer.

“When you’re a wolf, do you remember the stuff you do when you look human?”

“We are the same, regardless of our shape.”

My blood ran cold. He was a wolf, a predatory deadly beast, even now. That’s what he just told me.

He handed me a plate with my dinner. The smell of the roasted rabbit was heavenly. My mouth watered absurdly, and I felt that nasty gratitude again.

“What day is it? How long have I been here?” I asked him as I dug into the meat and ripped off a big piece. He had seasoned it with fresh herbs and it was perhaps the best thing I’d ever tasted.

“Tomorrow will be your third day here.”

Three days! And he’d cared for me and not killed me all this time...

“When can I leave?”

“Now, if you like. Just put down your rabbit and stand up and walk out.” He gestured to the cave entrance, and the twist of his lips mocked me.

I blinked with shame and anger and weakness. I couldn’t do any of those things. I ripped off another large chunk of rabbit and stuffed it in my mouth along with a vegetable. As soon as I was finished, I demanded to see Flora.

“You can see her. You can ride her. We need to go.”

“Go?” I couldn’t even walk, or I would’ve left already.

“Yes. I got you here, but any further would’ve been too difficult with you unconscious.”

“Isn’t it safe here?”

“Safety is relative. Further is better. They’ll be looking for you.”

“Who will?”

“The pack who bought your life.”

11

THE PACK WHO bought your life.

I sputtered. Laughed. “The pack who *what?* Nobody bought me. I am owned by no one.”

“Really? Then tell me, if you will, how you came to be in the Woods.” The wolf-man doused the fire. He went into his chest and he removed things. He stuffed them into Flora’s pack—nuts and vegetables and a change of clothes. He packed the wax to condition my coat when it tried. He tossed a pair of his own leather pants to me. “Put them on.”

The world tipped sideways, changing faster than I could keep up. My head spun, and my full stomach only increased my drowsiness. The flowers on my leg had not had time to work, and I was still feverish. “I came into the Woods to gather Salvia acania for Gran’s injury. She might have died without it.”

“I see, and this was your own idea?”

“Um, no.”

“Then who sent you on this vital mission?”

“Colonel Leanna.”

“Why send you, and not some Huntsman under her command?”

“They were all busy with other tasks. So many died—”

“Put on the pants. Why not draw from the supply that the village keeps always in their medical stores?”

It was scary how much he knew about life inside the village walls. “She said the stores were destroyed in the attack.”

The wolf nodded. “So naturally, when you returned with your flowers, the gate opened immediately so your essential medical supplies could be rushed in to your Gran and the rest of the wounded.”

The bland tone of his sarcasm frustrated me almost as much as the leather pants that, though sized to fit him, did not want to climb up my

swollen legs and over my bandage. “You know damn well I wouldn’t be out here if the gate opened.”

“Why didn’t it, daughter of the village?”

I still struggled with the pants. The wolf finished packing, and Flora’s bag rested over his shoulder. He came to me and held out his hands, and I had no choice but to take them. As if I weighed nothing, he gave a small tug and I found myself on my feet. His hands moved to my waist, steadyng me as I tugged the pants up, quick as I could, and tied them. When I was finished, he didn’t let go.

We were both dressed like Huntsmen now. White shirts and brown leather pants. I wore his jacket and he wore none. His long curling black hair was not regulation.

“Lean on the wall.”

I put a hand on the stone, and his hands left my waist. He bent over and picked up both axes. Before I could even beat myself up for letting them out of my reach, he held one out to me.

“I’ll keep one for myself, if it’s alright with you.” Without waiting for my answer, he scooped me up in his arms like a child. Pain cut through my leg as we moved and I cried out. “Quiet. Take your jacket.”

He’d hung Gran’s coat to dry on an outcropping on the wall, and I grabbed it as we passed. I cuddled the still-damp leather in my lap next to the axe. When we got outside, he stopped once more to pick up my boots, which he’d kept at the cave entrance. Then he walked us away from the orange-lit cavern and into the dark trees.

But we didn’t walk far. Soon I heard a whinny and I perked up in his arms, struggling against him as if I believed I could move faster towards Flora on my own. A strangled sound of joy escaped my throat as her shape came into view, tied to a tree. I reached for her with my arms, and when we came beside her, the wolf put me down. My arms wrapped shakily around her body, and I cried into her mane.

“Flora, Flora, you’re alive!”

She’d survived when I barely had. She put her head down to nudge my face, pleased to see me. I hugged her like we were the only two beings left in the world.

But we weren’t. The wolf watched as I inspected Flora for injuries—none but shallow scratches on her sides and legs—and tried fruitlessly to detangle her hair. I spoke to her in a quiet voice and I petted her. For a time,

the wolf allowed us this. Then he came forward and petted Flora too. She let him. I felt irrationally betrayed. She trusted him? How could she be so stupid?

He saw my frown and laughed. “Be glad, daughter of the village. How do you think I caught her?”

“You caught her?”

“No, I found her tied to a tree.”

I glanced at him sharply and saw his smirk. Fantastic. A sarcastic wolf.

“How did you even know I had a horse?” But evidently, that was one of the stupid questions he would not deign to answer.

“I’ll lift you on. You’ll ride alright, with a beast who knows you so well. We have to go.”

“She’s no beast,” I muttered rebelliously. A look flashed across his face, but it was gone before I could place it.

“This will hurt,” the wolf said. I nearly laughed. What didn’t hurt, in the Woods?

I clutched Gran’s wet jacket and my precious axe, and he lifted me into his arms. The scent of him—like wet dirt and fur. Yet clean, the air before a snowfall. I hated his touch. I focused on the lancing pain in my leg, because I preferred it to the thought of his hands on me. I could not straddle Flora, so he settled me sidesaddle.

The pressure it put on my leg was immense. I clutched Flora’s reins. “I don’t know if I can stay up here.” My vision faded and came back. Flora shifted on her feet, and the next thing I knew the wolf’s body came up beside mine. Those long-fingered hands went around my waist once more.

He took the reins from my hand. He leaned into me to untie Flora from the tree. He wheeled her around as if he were an expert. “You’ll have to try.” He lifted his nose to scent the air, and frowned at what he smelled. “And stay quiet. They’ll check here tonight, I think. But they don’t know your horse’s scent. It’ll be harder for them to track than mine or yours. We must hope they don’t follow it.”

We rode out in silence.

The pack who bought your life. It was easier to think about than how warm his body was, holding mine steady. Easier to think about than the pain that made me wish for unconsciousness. With every minute that passed, I thought I could not hold out any longer. I wanted to fall off and lie in the dirt and never wake up. Tears rolled down my cheeks and I tried to keep

silent. I hated the wolf behind me, who tricked people with his human mask and cared nothing for causing me this pain.

The pack who bought your life. Easier to think about.

“Let’s say you’re right. And Colonel Leanna sold me. Why would she do that? Why would the pack buy me? Nobody makes sense.”

“Perhaps we should discuss it when you’re not feverish.”

“I am fine.” I leaned too far one way and the weight of his hand pressed me back.

“You are barely conscious. Go to sleep, daughter of the village. Let the flowers do their work.”

The next thing I knew, it was light. The world did not move under me. A blanket was tucked up under my chin. Beneath me, a real mattress stuffed with feathers soothed my aches. I opened my eyes.

I lay in a cottage like the one I was imprisoned in. For a moment, panic flared. But then I blinked the crusts away and looked again. This was not like the one I was imprisoned in. That was an ancient, abandoned thing, empty of all but death. This place looked more like the baker’s cottage inside the village. Pots and pans hung from a rack near the ceiling. A candle waited for night on a clean table with two chairs beside it. Mine was the only bed, but a pile of extra blankets lay nearby, and a fire cast its warmth around the single room. The door was the only odd thing—over-wide and over-tall, with no doorknob or lock to keep it shut.

I sat up. Relief swept through me, for the cottage did not spin. I shucked off my pants and peeled back the wrap on my leg. The skin was not as hot and red as it was before. The swelling seemed to have gone down. I felt my forehead and it was warm but not hot.

The flowers were working.

Beside my bed I saw a pot of water with petals floating on the surface. Beside it, a new bowl of paste and a pile of leaves. The wolf had left me the supplies to re-bandage my wounds, and I set about the task with hopeful enthusiasm. Yellow light sent its shafts through the large windows, and I found myself humming.

I was not going to die of an infection. It was the best news I’d had in a week.

When I was re-bandaged and re-dressed, I considered what to do next. I felt hungry. That was a good sign. A sign of health. But could I stand and walk? Did I want to risk it? I wished to know where Flora was, and I

wished to know where the wolf was, and where I was in the vastness of the Woods. More than anything, I wanted to know what would happen to me next.

The pack that bought you will come for you, the wolf had said. He could be lying. But in the light of day and with a clear head, it seemed like truth.

The wolves had gotten inside the village. They killed doctors and innocents, they wiped out Huntsmen, they burned trucks and buildings. And then they were gone. Defeated. Only Colonel Leanna never defeated them at all, did she? She traded them something they wanted to get them to leave.

Gran's granddaughter.

Wolves always wanted the blood of young girls in the stories.

12

THE WOLF PACK was after me. It was not an accident that wolves found me on my first night in the Woods. They would come for me again unless I retreated back inside the village, and even if I could get to the gate, it would not open for me. Not unless Gran was better and back in charge. Until then, my safest course seemed to be the most insane one too: stay with this wolf and allow him to keep protecting me.

I thought it over as I went about my day alone. I munched on nuts found in the kitchen, I detangled the knots in Flora's mane. I lovingly rubbed wax into my stiff, dried coat. I was able to walk now, with a stick to help me. The magic of the flowers was doing its work. I thought I could ride Flora now. All I had to do was mount and leave. All afternoon, I considered it.

And I hated myself for the decision I made. The Woods required survival, and this wolf was the best chance I had. It's not what Gran would do. Gran would stand on one leg, cut him down with her axe, and hop back to the village. But I was not Gran. I did not have Gran's knowledge or resources.

I was sitting up in bed when he came back in the dark, pushing open the oversized door and entering in his human form. He looked me over with those sharp yellow eyes.

"I see you're feeling better."

"Where are we?"

The wolf-man moved into the room and closed the door behind him. Into a drawer he went, emerging with a flint, which he used to light a lantern on the counter. Then he moved over to the hearth. Of course I'd let the fire die. He sat on the floor and arranged kindling.

"We are in the home of an old friend of mine."

My eyes tracked the door. "Is he here too?"

"No."

“Why not?”

“I thought you would not want to meet him.”

The cruel faces of my almost-rapists filled my mind. “Why not?”

“One wolf is your current limit, I believe.”

“Why did you bring me here?”

“My lair is close to the pack’s. They know my scent. They will smell me on the man I killed to rescue you; they will track us to my lair. I laid false trails as best I could, but days passed while you were unconscious. They were very near finding us. Sampson’s cottage is further from the pack’s land, and he is not as well-known to them. I am hoping I can hide you longer here.”

“Hide me until when? You still haven’t told me what you want me for.”

“True, I have not.” He said nothing else, only used the lantern to light the fire in the hearth.

The nuts filling my stomach made me feel strong and braver than before. I straightened my spine and mustered up the tone of voice Gran used to address her troops. “If you expect my cooperation, you need to give me some incentive. I could’ve left today, you know.”

The wolf-man sat back on his haunches. He stared at me a moment and then he laughed. He touched a stick in the fire with his bare hand. “Did you feel alone, little girl? Did you consider mounting your horse and riding away from me? I assure you, I run faster.”

Enough of this twisted half-talk. I wished he would simply threaten me straight.

“Why did the pack buy me? Why would I be worth surrendering the village for?”

“Ah, finally a sensible question from a fever-free mind. And yet you already know the answers. You know whose grandchild you are. You know the old stories.”

I did. I knew everything about the history of Big Village that could be read in a book. “The wolves take girls. But why?”

The wolf-man glanced at me and then away, his face shrouded in shadow.

Visions of brutal violence flashed in my mind. Every bloody thing I’d ever seen and every fear I’d ever registered combined together to paint a picture of a fate worse than death. Then the faces in the images transformed until they were all Marta’s, her soft features contorted in agony.

“I had a friend who was taken during the attack. Her name is Marta. Do you have any idea where she might be or what might have happened to her?”

“She was taken from inside the village by a pack member?”

I nodded.

“Then there’s only a few places she could be. Still with the pack, perhaps, or they could have released her.”

“Is she dead?”

“How could I know that?”

“Do they—do they kill them right away? The girls they take?”

His sharp eyes studied me. They contained something new, a curiosity. “In most cases, they don’t.”

A sharp cut of hope. So, this pack who hunted for me might have Marta. If I allowed them to find me, they might bring me right to her. It changed everything...or did it? I wanted to run out through the unlocked door and into the Woods, shouting my name. But if they captured me, then what? I could hardly help Marta in chains.

The wolf-man’s dark curls were soft and clean, with yellow flame lighting the tips of the strands.

“What’s your name?”

“Timber.” It fit him.

“Alright, Timber. I know you won’t tell me what you want my help for. So I’ll tell you something. I promise you that I will not help you if doing so harms the village, or any person that I love. I promise that I won’t sacrifice my life for your cause, and that I’ll never stop trying to go home. If I can still help you under those conditions, then I will. Because I know you saved my life.”

Brave words, but my bravery was hollow. Inside me I felt lost like a little girl, bargaining with chips she didn’t have. He knew it—I could hear it in his answer. “Very reasonable,” he said, with his familiar mocking edge. I pressed ahead anyway.

“But first, I want your help finding my friend. I need to know if she’s okay. I need to get her back to the village safely.”

Timber laughed. “You can’t even save yourself and you want to help a friend.”

Sharp and automatic, I spit my answer at him. “That’s what friends are. Maybe you don’t know.”

The barest frown in his forehead. He glanced away from me, eyes circling the minimalist furniture of the cottage.

Just then, there was a noise outside, and the wolf-man was on his feet with his teeth bared in a half a second. An axe I'd not noticed rested in his right hand, and he stood on his toes, his knees bent. A low growl escaped his throat and found an answer in a growl from outside, only feet away from the door.

Heart racing, I felt beside me for my own axe, and I took it up in both hands. Should I stand and hold my ground? Run to Flora? Hide? Without intending to, I looked to Timber for instruction. He offered none; his narrow eyes held the door.

“You may as well come in,” he called, and the enormous door flew in. Its hinges held it as it slammed against the wall. The face that appeared out of the darkness looked like a young man’s, but his ears were pointed and his sharp teeth were bared. The eyes of this stranger drifted off the wolf and came to rest on me. They devoured me, and my face burned. Blond hair, like two of my previous attackers. I saw the familiar features in his jaw, his thick brows.

“Timber,” the intruding wolf said. He inclined his head politely, although he still displayed his teeth.

“Ryder. Which master do you come for?”

Ryder curled his lip and spit on the clean floor. “I serve the Alpha.”

“Of course,” said Timber. “And what does our Alpha want?”

The wolf threw back his head and laughed. He howled at the moon with his human mouth, and I felt goosebumps rise across my skin. Then he stared at me and licked his lips. “You know what he wants.”

I shivered. Bile rose in my throat.

“She has infected wounds. She cannot travel.”

“How incredible it is then that she managed to arrive here, to your own mentor’s haven, so off the beaten path.”

Timber’s jaw clenched and his hand adjusted on the handle of the axe. His opponent carried no weapon I could see, but his fingernails were sharpened, and I had a discomfiting feeling he didn’t need one.

“Tomorrow night,” Timber said. “I’ll bring her to him.”

The wolf laughed again. “I’ll take her now. You’re welcome to come with us. Luthor’s family is eager to give you their regards.” His smile was a bladed weapon and his eyes were hungry.

Who was Luthor?

Timber's face was carved stone in firelight. If he was feeling anything, thinking anything, I could not see it. His nose sucked in air, and the wolf Ryder smiled again.

"Go ahead and try it."

Timber took breath after breath. Then, as if unfrozen, he relaxed his body. The axe stayed in his hand, but dangled loosely. "She has a horse she can ride. I'll carry her to it."

"I'll carry her," Ryder volunteered.

"I'll walk." My voice cracked. I cleared my throat and grabbed my walking stick. I never let go of my axe. With short hops, I went to Gran's jacket. I'd laid it over a chair to let the wax soak in, and when I came to it I found it ready for me once again. Timber looked on with no expression and Ryder laughed at the moon as I shrugged my arms into the old leather. One sleeve was half ripped off, where I'd sustained the puncture wounds in my shoulder. I took back up my axe and walking stick.

I turned to the face of the enemy. "I'm ready."

Ryder's pointed teeth could open my blood vessels with a single bite, even now. "Fantastic."

I stepped outside with my walking stick. The wolves followed me out, one over each shoulder. In the moonlight I saw another shape waiting. A fit body lounged against a tree, picking at his fingernails.

Was this what Timber smelled that stopped him from fighting? Two against one were bad odds, and I would be no help.

The three men escorted me to Flora. She did not trust the strangers as she had Timber. "Shh, there, there, it's okay," I told her. She would not stay still and Timber had trouble lifting me onto her.

"No need to bring that." Ryder indicated the axe Timber had tucked into his belt. "Sampson may need it."

Timber's eyes flashed at the threat, but he tugged the axe from his belt with a single quick motion and dropped it on the ground.

"Follow," Ryder said, and he walked out into the Woods. I turned Flora to follow as Ryder broke into a loping run. Timber took up position beside me, and the other stranger ran behind. There was no question: I was caught in the jaws of the wolf-pack now, helpless between my escorts.

We ran all night. I expected their stamina to dim, but it never did. On Flora's back, I kept up the pace easily, though my thigh ached and then

stabbed sharply and then went numb. I needed to change the wraps again, but I couldn't exactly stop and take my pants off. I suffered until dawn, when Ryder stopped running and turned back to me. He was huffing hard, his delicate eyebrows bent in a frown of exertion.

"You will keep following," he said.

"I need to rest. I need to change my bandages. I need water, and to sleep."

"We will rest when we rest. Until then you will follow." He bared his teeth. "Or I will eat your fucking horse."

Flora shuddered and stepped nervously, as if she understood. Probably she only felt my legs clench around her as his words sickened me. In the faraway Woods, a howl sounded. The wolves began to change.

I did not look at Timber, who backed away as fur sprouted across his body. I did not want to see him. Instead, I watched Ryder, fascinated, disgusted and afraid. His blond hair grew longer, matching fur emerging from his forearms. He ripped off his shirt and pants as he dropped to all fours. Sickening crunching sounded as his limbs elongated and he grew, grew. Now I must look up at him; his yellow eyes were higher than my head as I sat on Flora's back. He bared his teeth and growled, leaving no doubt that he could eat Flora like he said.

I held Flora's reins doubled over in my fist, tight. I spoke quiet words to her. I pulled a spare shirt from our pack and wrapped it over her eyes. Ryder-the-wolf waited almost patiently. I nodded to him when I was ready, and he turned and began to walk. I followed, keeping Flora blindfolded.

No more running, for the wolves would have quickly outpaced me. Instead we walked on and on. I paid attention to the Woods, trying to store our route in memory, but there was no clear path and the trees looked the same to me. I tried not to look at Timber, walking beside me.

It was nearly dusk when we stopped beside a low creek. I practically fell from Flora's back, hating Timber's warm fur body even as he caught me and broke my fall. My foot hit the dirt and a shot of tingling pain climbed my leg. I dropped to the bed of pine cones and clutched it. I tried to massage feeling back into the muscles even as I fought the agony of the pain returning. Tears rolled down my cheeks and I couldn't even care about the scornful eyes of my enemies watching. I sat in the dirt and sobbed, my fingers working on my skin.

The wolves did nothing. They lay down like dogs to rest. All but Timber, whose presence I felt behind my shoulder. I did not look back to see his grey beastly shape. I needed to check my wounds again, replace the bandages, but I couldn't bear the thought of removing my clothes in front of them all. Instead I only limped to the creek and scooped up fresh water greedily onto my sweaty face and into my hungry mouth.

"I need food," I called back to the wolves, but not one of them moved. Were they finally tired? Was that why they chose to rest here after so much uninterrupted travel?

Timber growled. His head turned and he stared into the low branches. A large shape moved towards us. The light yellow coat of the wolf blended with the fall colors of the trees. Ryder barked in greeting. The other escort stood silent.

Timber's growling grew louder. He barked, fast and aggressive yelps. He licked his lips. An answering growl came from the intruder as the yellow wolf stepped out from between the trees. Ryder sank down in a sort of bow while Timber bared his teeth.

Was this the Alpha?

The new wolf stood calm. He held his head high and his eyes noticed everything. My skin prickled as they fell on me and ate me up. Something in them was familiar, and I remembered the last time a wolf with familiar eyes caught me resting by a creek. He almost took my leg off before Timber killed him. Timber looked ready to kill now.

The yellow wolf took a step towards me, and Timber moved to intercept him. Instantly the yellow wolf's demeanor changed. No longer haughty and restrained. His fur bristled and he showed his gums. Ryder imitated him, turning on Timber, ready to fight.

The other escort barked. He alone still sat, distant from the others and seemingly without a side in the building battle. He barked again, and then howled into the sky.

Danger charged the air. These wolves might fight, and I needed to go before I found myself the prize of the winner. Timber had saved me last time, but he was outnumbered now.

Flora was tied near Timber; I would have to approach the snapping jaws of the circling wolves to get her. And even if I could reach her, could I mount without help?

A tear leaked out from behind my eye. The world felt impossible. I tried to survive, to make brave choices and do smart things, but no matter what I did, yellow eyes came for me through the trees. There were no right answers; there were no escapes. I was prey caught in a trap. About to be fought over and won, again.

The three wolves stalked each other, moving slowly closer to engagement. They promised each other violence and they watched each other for weakness. The fourth, the howler, stayed back. An observer.

I called to them. “They’re already taking me to the Alpha; there’s no need for this!”

The yellow wolf almost seemed to smile. And then he attacked. His teeth latched onto Timber’s shoulder. Ryder circled the other way and snapped at his ribs. Timber dodged and shook off the shallow grip of the teeth. He backed away, head turning to keep both opponents in view. He couldn’t win. Not against both of them.

The fourth wolf howled once more. And in the nearby woods, another howl answered. All the wolves stopped moving, their ears alert. Could they hear more than I could in that call? Did they know who it was?

From the direction we’d come, a new wolf joined the fight. His back was black and his stomach was white. He stood higher than any of the others. His tongue was out and he panted from exertion. He had run a long way to get here, and he was just in time. He took up a position beside Timber, between the other wolves and I.

It was a standoff. Neither pair attacked—they only growled and barked and occasionally paced. With every sound and movement I tensed, but the longer they teased each other, the more convinced I became that the risk of battle was over. Eventually I limped to Flora, retying her blindfold and speaking quietly to quell her terror. I thought of the bunkers, and the children I told my stories to. It was as much to save me from fear as to save them. In an almost soundless whisper, I spun a tale for Flora.

The sun was descending when I heard cracking branches in the trees once more. Flora whinnied and shifted, and I wrapped my arms around her. New wolves—two of them—walked towards us. I waited for the growls and the barks, for the shifting of the odds, but around me there was only silence. Not far off, a new howl sounded as the sun touched the ground. Then they all began to change.

I closed my eyes. I buried my face in Flora's side and breathed in the dirty sweat scent of her. When the horrible bone crunching sounds stopped, I opened my eyes and I looked at the faces of the wolf-men.

Beside Timber stood a tall man, dark skinned and well-muscled. His tightly curling hair and beard were half-white, showing his age. Beside Ryder, a man I recognized. Perfectly coiled yellow curls caressed his shoulders. My nostrils flooded with the remembered scent of rotting carcass. I bent over and heaved. Suddenly I was grateful for my empty stomach. He saw, and smiled at me, a crooked pull of his lip with coldness in the eyes.

I did not recognize the two newest arrivals. They spoke first. "The Alpha expected her by now. Why did you stop?"

The man with the blond curls used his strangely accented, silken words. "Why, we were bringing her to him when these packless tried to steal her for themselves."

Timber bared his human teeth and growled. His thick round shoulders pressed backwards, and he looked inhuman.

The asker looked past us all to the final escort who'd taken no side. He raised an eyebrow. The escort shrugged.

Factions of wolves. That was the only explanation, yet it baffled me. Wolves were beasts. Animals. Monsters. And they were all the same. It's what I always believed. Now I understood little but this: they were not all the same.

"He'll settle it. He's waiting," said one of the new arrivals. Then they both turned away and disappeared into the darkening woods. The rest of us had no choice but to follow.

I turned my head away from Timber's nakedness as he lifted me onto Flora's back. He saw, and lifted pants from Flora's pack and put them on. He passed a pair to his friend as well, but the other wolf-men seemed unashamed and walked on as if they could not feel the cold.

Timber took Flora's reins and led her safely over roots too shadowed for me to see. His friend walked beside him, and they greeted each other in quiet voices.

"Sampson, meet Red. How did you find us?"

"I smelled them at my cottage and followed the scent trail. Though Geor's howl helped."

"Still taking no sides."

“I’d say he took your side. They would have ripped you up, Tim.”

“Thanks for coming.”

“It’s a misguided mission, Tim, but I still couldn’t let them kill you.”

“It’s your daughter’s mission.”

“Doesn’t make it right.”

“Excuse me, but what mission is that?”

Sampson opened his mouth to answer, but Timber shook his head to stop him. “You hear anything about her Gran?”

“She’s not dead, but she’s not in command either.”

Timber frowned. “Leanna?”

“No. In fact, Leanna was found yesterday on the Huntsmen’s path. She was alone, with minimal supplies and out of uniform.”

“Expelled. So Gran is back in charge.”

“My sources say she’s not. Someone else is. But who, we don’t know.”

Who could be in charge besides Gran? But did it even matter, so long as she was alive?

“Was Leanna okay?” I asked. She’d done a horrible thing to me, but it didn’t mean I wanted her dead.

Sampson was silent. He looked to Timber, as if for permission. Timber nodded.

“No, little one. She wasn’t okay,” Sampson said.

I was silent for a time. Then, in my quietest voice, “Timber, that wolf with the yellow curling hair. He took me captive. He was in charge of the other men. The ones who tried to—” I swallowed back bile at the memories.

Timber nodded. “I know.”

“Who is he?”

“If the Alpha is a king, Rommel is a prince. He leads his own pack, but ultimately answers to the Alpha’s rule.”

“He came to take me again today, didn’t he? Like before. He wants me for himself.”

Timber’s silence was answer enough.

13

SEVEN GUARDS AND one young woman in the dark. Flora's hooves navigated the underbrush but I was not leading her. I might as well be blindfolded. I did not know how close we were to the Alpha's lair, or to the village, or to any landmark I might recognize. It seemed sudden when we finally arrived.

New guards materialized from behind trees like shadows come to life. They spoke quietly to the Alpha's escorts, and then let us pass. The trees thinned. Those that remained were ancient, thick beasts. Decaying old stumps kept watch between them. Then a field appeared ahead. A hill rose behind it, dotted with caverns. On another side, a stream brought water. And on the third, a group of cottages clustered. Outside them, small fires lit the air with orange and smoke. A small group of women carried baskets and prepared food and shouted at children—all young boys.

“There are *children* here?” I asked Timber. He didn’t answer.

In the center of the field roared a large bonfire, its flames far above my head. A smaller fire nearby cooked a boar on a spit. Logs acted as posts to support a roof with no walls. Benches made of half-logs suggested a place to eat, or escape the rain.

Between the two fires sat a figure in a high-backed wooden chair, draped heavily with furs. He was male, like nearly every person I’d seen since entering the Woods. His eyes were lined with wrinkles and his short hair was salt and pepper, but the power in his resting body and the awareness in his eyes as he watched our approach suggested the strengths of youth had not yet left him.

Around him roamed men. Wolves in the shapes of men, I should say, all with Timber’s over-thick arms and shoulders. Some shared his long dark hair, some shared Sampson’s coloring, though many were blond with those features I’d come to hate and fear. All shared a likeness that went beyond

their pointed features. They looked primeval. A sharpness to their jaws and their brows. They were creatures of the Woods, beasts who could not disguise their natures no matter their form. Not that they tried. Only half of them wore any clothes. On several arms, dark ink etched the shape of a tree with deep roots. In one area they fought each other with axes. Practice for killing my people.

The last two escorts to join us reached the Alpha first, and curtly bowed their heads.

He dismissed them with a wave of his hand. Geor, whose howl helped Sampson find us, walked behind the throne and took up a position over the Alpha's shoulder. Another man already stood on the other side. Bodyguards.

Ryder approached next, and bowed deeply. "Alpha, I have brought your property, as requested."

"And a few others I didn't ask for. Was Goer not sufficient escort for your journey with the little human girl?"

Ryder's face burned.

Rommel stepped forward. "I am always happy to assist my nephew Ryder, and to serve my Alpha." He inclined his head, but it was more of a 'you're welcome' than a bow like the others had given.

The Alpha did not respond. His face did not change. He hadn't even looked at me yet, and I felt like a discarded piece of meat, a disinteresting prize he was saving for later.

"Timber. My lost brother. Perhaps you can tell me why it took so long for Red here to find her way to us. And why, once we tracked her, we found her with you."

"Sir. I'm sure you can see her injuries with your own eyes. When I found her, she was very near death. I did not believe her well enough to survive the trip to you."

"It is such a long trip. But then, not as long as to Sampson's." The Alpha's eyes flared.

Sampson's jaw was tight enough for me to see a nerve throbbing in his cheek. Stiffly, he inclined his head in obeisance. "Alpha."

The Alpha held up a hand. "You have rejected my authority and therefore are not welcome here. You may leave."

Sampson looked at Timber.

"Thank you, my friend," Timber said.

Sampson looked at me. I think I saw pity. Then he turned and he walked back the way we came.

“Perhaps, Sir, you might ask instead how your prize was so injured.” Timber eyed Rommel. The Alpha followed the track that Timber carved. Turning his eyes to Rommel, he raised his brows in question.

Rommel was ready with a smile. “Why, I spent my day searching for a lost brother of mine—perhaps you heard, Luthor has gone missing—when I happened upon Ryder and the girl.”

Luthor’s family is eager to give you their regards, Ryder had said to Timber.

By now I suspected that Luthor was the name of the tall blond man who tried to rape me. When he came for me as a wolf, Timber had killed him. And Rommel knew.

Were they all related? Luthor and Rommel were brothers, and Ryder was a nephew. All about me, I saw the familial resemblance. *Your Gran started a war to save your mother’s life,* Timber had told me. Loyalty like that is what makes a family. What would this family do to avenge their fallen brother?

Goosebumps rose on my skin. I was still on Flora’s back—theoretically we could escape in any direction. But the open space was just another trick.

Around us gathered the pack. No longer did axes clang against each other in practice. It seemed like the whole clearing had quieted to listen, men inching closer with every word.

Timber’s voice was quiet and steady. “Rommel happened upon her on her first night in the Woods, too. Red says he took her to a cottage and locked her in.”

Rommel spit on the ground. “Lies. Packless mutts are always full of lies.”

Timber’s jaw clenched. “Erik, you know me to be a man of honor. I respect the old ways, as you do.”

“Not enough to bow to the Alpha. Not enough to live by any law but your own,” Rommel said.

The Alpha hesitated. Whispers and glances passed around the gathered men. Behind Rommel stood a ring of blonds. They did not whisper. They already knew whose side they were on.

The Alpha looked at me for the first time. He had to look up, and I felt a surge of false power. “Dismount.”

My power sputtered and died as quickly as it was born. Timber came to my side and lifted me off. I steadied myself with a hand on Flora's side, clenching tight to her reins. I tried to stand tall as sensation crawled like fire ants around my infected wounds.

"Come here."

I limped forward, dragging Flora with me. The gathered crowd laughed. Only two steps forward before the Alpha held up his hand to stop me.

"What happened to you when you came into the Woods? How were you injured?"

Should I tell the truth? Here was my chance to point a finger, but I feared it would only put me in more danger. The pack waited in silence for my answer. I'd expected wolves to always be moving, always prowling, but this pack was coiled tension. Predators practicing stillness as they waited for the right moment to strike.

I glanced at Timber. Perhaps I should not trust his judgment, yet still I sought it. His eyes watched Rommel and revealed nothing. But he'd tried to tell the Alpha the truth. Perhaps I should follow his lead? I was still uncertain whether he wished the best for me or simply carried out his own agenda. I had no idea how that agenda might hurt me. I should make this decision alone.

I glanced at the cottages, seeking the faces of the women who worked outside them. Was Marta one of those faces? But the women were gone now, faded into the swarm.

In the end, I think I told the truth because it was easiest.

"I came into the Woods to gather Salvia acania for Gran. She was hurt badly in your attack and needed them to heal. That's what Colonel Leanna told me, anyway. When I had the flowers, I knocked on the gate, but it wouldn't open. I went down the path to try to find somewhere safe to spend the night, but wolves found me and I was surrounded. I thought I was dead when three men with axes showed up and scared the wolves away. At first I thought they were Huntsmen, and I was relieved." I pointed a finger at Rommel. "He was their leader."

Whispers rising in the crowd. Behind Rommel, the pack of blonds stayed silent.

"But the three men brought me to an abandoned cottage and locked me in. He disappeared after that, but the others came back. They—" I

swallowed and took a breath. I summoned my bravery and held my head high. “They tried to rape me.”

I expected whispers in the crowd at that. Shock and outrage. But there was only silence.

“Did they succeed?” the Alpha asked, his voice a drawling expression of disinterest.

Anger superseded my fear and trauma. Now I wished fervently to take the axe off my back and use it to kill them all. I wondered suddenly why the bodyguards let me keep it. Probably because I was no danger, and they knew it. I wished so hard to prove them wrong.

“No,” I said proudly. “I fought them off.”

Now there was laughing in the crowd, and talking as the wolves expressed to each other how very unlikely they thought this. Even the Alpha smiled a little.

“Did you now, sweet girl?” He leaned forward with a wolf’s quickness and he stared deep into my eyes. His teeth were bared and he emitted a small growl. “It’s not right to lie.”

I met his gaze with all the fire Gran’s blood instilled in me. “I’m not lying.”

They were not sure now.

“They came at me, and I cut one with my axe and I stuck the other in the eye with an old bone. Then I ran.”

The Alpha considered me. He studied Rommel. And then he fixed his gaze on Timber. “This is when you found her?”

Timber nodded. But he was lying now. He didn’t find me until after my captor—by then a wolf—found me first. Timber killed him to save me.

“I see,” the Alpha said. “Rommel?”

Rommel emitted a low growl. “I was only procuring her for you, Alpha. I could not know what my men would try to do.”

“And today? You met Ryder and the girl...”

“To be sure she reached you.” His voice was a blade hidden in silk. “That’s why I intercepted her when the bitches tried to take her. And why I helped Ryder secure her after the packless ones stole her. After all,” he pitched his voice louder, as if every pointed ear within a mile wasn’t already listening, “we bled to win this little bitch. She’s ours to keep.”

The whispering in the crowd rose in volume, an indistinct hissing sound coming from every direction. The Alpha’s face was paler in the firelight

than before.

“And yet giving her away is what tradition demands,” Timber said.

The Alpha’s eyes darted around his whispering pack. Abruptly, he stood. “Rommel, Timber. Bring the girl.” He strode away, entering a cave in the hill. His bodyguards went in behind him as the pack stayed behind, still whispering.

Limping, I followed. I brought Flora with me, leaning my weight on her. I wouldn’t let her out of my sight. Inside the cavern there was only a small fire to light up the stone.

The Alpha rounded on Rommel. I noticed now he wore a fur vest that fell to the floor. Under it his wide chest was bare, with curling salt and pepper hairs, and he wore a pair of pants that did not come from the village. I wondered where the cloth was made.

“So you thought you’d take her for yourself. Disrespecting me. Disrespecting tradition. I imagine you thought her disappearance would make it look like Leanna dishonored her word and tricked me.” These were not questions, but statements. “And you—” he addressed Timber. “Rather than bring her to me, you kept her for yourself, though I can’t begin to guess at your motives. Perhaps Sampson has influenced you more than I believed.”

Rommel raised his chin proudly. He bared his teeth and emitted a growl. “Tradition was restored when they locked the gate behind her. What we do with her is up to—”

“—to me! What we do with her is up to me.”

“She’s the grandchild of our greatest enemy.”

“And so she deserves nothing better than what your dogs would have given her? Is that it?”

Rommel said nothing, only growled again. I took that as a yes.

“That is not the way,” Timber said. “Tradition calls for more than that. It tells of our right to the blood, and speaks also of what we must do for the girls, once they are ours.”

“Wait, what are you supposed to do with me? What’s the tradition?”

“The tradition mandates you be sent to Grandmother’s House, unless you choose of your own will to stay with the pack,” Timber said. His eyes were on the Alpha, and he spoke the words to remind him.

“Grandmother’s House?!?” Absurdly, I imagined for a moment that they might return me to the safety of the cottage where I grew up. “What is

that?"

No answer.

The Alpha breathed heavily. It was as if he didn't know what to do with me now that he had me. Behind the puffed up chest, I saw the weakness of a leader swayed by the loudest voice.

"Alpha," Rommel's strangely accented voice scratched. "Wolves died to take Big Village. The greatest battle won in decades, and you give up the fortress as soon as you have it. Do not make your pack sacrifice more! Allow them to enjoy their victory. Send the other girls to Grandmother's House, or take them as mates. Her—" He bared his teeth and the cave flooded with his hatred. "Her, let me ruin."

I saw myself clearly now as a pawn in a long game with rules I did not understand. They talked as if it was a tradition for Big Village to give girls to the wolves, but I had never heard of it before. In the stories, the wolves always took. They were never given. How many others were sacrificed like this before me? And why didn't the history books speak of it?

"Great sacrifices were made to restore the old way," Timber said.
"Those sacrifices are in vain if we do not honor the old way now."

Rommel's lip curled. "You did not join us in battle. You are not our brother. You are a coward who kills your own kind."

Timber held his head high, saying nothing.

"What is this?" The Alpha looked between them.

But it seemed Rommel did not wish the Alpha to know of the circumstances surrounding Luthor's death. For long moments he only stood and breathed, heavy shoulders rising and falling. And then, he exploded. The tenuous facade of civilized, man-like behavior cracked and shattered, and the wolf emerged in all his beastliness. I saw clearly how much it cost him to behave properly, and I wondered why he tried at all. He spit out his words and each scratching, hissing sound was an edged blade.

"Sir, this child is the spawn of our greatest enemy. She deserves nothing more than to serve us like a pig. To be punished, to be broken, and then roasted on a spit and sent back to her grandparents in small, charred pieces."

I thought I might be sick.

The Alpha was silent. I realized he was thinking it over and my heart beat fast.

The Alpha turned to his bodyguard. "Goer?"

The bodyguard considered. Out in the Woods, he had not taken a side. Which side would he take now?

“I cannot agree with Rommel’s actions in seeking to keep the girl from you, but I do agree with his proposal now. Tradition has been honored—the old pact is restored. Give her to the pack. Let them take their pleasure from her pain.”

I breathed deep to stay steady. It was a fate worse than death. And yet there seemed to be nothing I could do to stop it.

I thought of begging. I really seriously considered it. I imagined I might move the Alpha’s heart and earn freedom. I imagined him laughing and giving me to his men. Either way, I burned with shame. I wore Gran’s coat and would not beg. I held my head high and prayed.

Timber’s voice was smooth. “Erik, the values of our fathers have kept us civilized since the curse descended on us and made us what we are. Without those values—” he glanced at Rommel “—we are nothing more than beasts.”

Rommel’s throat vibrated with his derision. The low sound filled the cave.

Timber spoke over it. “The village disrespected us when they ceased to send their women into the Woods. That respect has now been restored, and the blood of our enemy offered. There is no need for further violence.”

“You sound like a man,” sneered Rommel. “A need for violence. It is our nature.”

“It’s not mine.”

Rommel laughed, looking truly mirthful for the first time. “Oh yes, cousin, it is. It is in all of us. You are a beast like us too.”

“Alpha, may we speak alone?” Timber asked.

Rommel spit on the ground.

“Sir—” Geor began.

The Alpha held up his hand. “Yes. Leave us, all of you. Take the girl to my cottage and guard her. Do not harm her.”

Rommel approached me and grabbed me firmly by the upper arm. He chose my injured arm, and his squeezing grip hurt. I panicked.

“Please don’t make me go with them! I’ll, um, stay here. I’ll stay with Timber. Or maybe you can call other guards.”

Timber’s eyes flashed danger, and I realized I’d jeopardized his chance to speak to the Alpha alone, on my behalf. Rommel licked his lips.

“Um, never mind. I’ll go.”

Timber gave me a small nod. My fear made my legs weak, but Rommel’s hand kept me standing. I passed Flora to Timber.

As soon as we left the cave, the pack swarmed around us. Predators with muscled bare chests circled me on all sides, their warm skin brushing mine as they came too close.

“I’m going to eat you,” one whispered in my ear, but when I whirled my head around to see his face, he was just one of the crowd. He could have been any of them.

“Pretty little prize.”

“I’ll hold her for you, Rommel.”

“Think she’d look good with an axe shoved up her—”

Laughing.

“Poor little girl lost in the Woods.”

Their jeering surrounded me. I felt my face burn with humiliation, and my lungs seize up with fear. I kept my eyes on our target—a cottage at the edge of the field. There was light in the small windows, and I fixated on it as salvation. I took a halting step forward, and then another. As much as I hated it, I leaned against Rommel’s hand for strength. I felt hands grope at me, grabbing and squeezing and twisting, sometimes pushing. I cried out, and then swallowed my cries. This was the least of what would happen to me if Timber failed to get the Alpha on my side.

I still had my axe. When the moment came, I’d kill as many of them as I could before they took it from me.

We reached the cottage. Tears burned in my eyes and I was determined not to let them fall. Rommel wrenched open the door and shoved me through.

“Alpha says keep her in here,” he told a woman who sat at a table by the fire. She nodded.

“You may go,” she said.

Rommel curled his lip at that, but he left all the same. There was only one door out of the cottage, and I felt sure he was guarding it. I staggered with no support, reaching for the wall.

The woman was sewing. The fabric was knotted and undyed, like the Alpha’s pants. In her needle went, and out again. She kept up a steady pace as she studied me with brown eyes. Her hair was in a braid behind her ears. Her ears were rounded at the tops, like mine. And when she smiled kindly

at me, her teeth were not pointed. Around her eyes were gentle wrinkles, and in her brown hair were stray strands of grey. I thought she was probably about the Alpha's age. But in every other way, she was more like me than them.

I glanced around the cottage and found it impeccably clean. Clearly the owner took great pride in it, and it had a cozy feel, for all its simplicity. Yet didn't the Alpha say this was his cottage?

"What's your name?" the woman asked me.

"Red." I realized I'd finally let my tears fall, and I reached up and brushed them furiously from my cheeks.

"Sit down, Red." She gestured to the bench across from her. "Are you hungry?"

"Um..." My stomach was empty, but there was no way I could eat while my fate was being decided. I shook my head and limped towards the seat she'd indicated. I bent to take it and winced. A hiss escaped from between my teeth.

The woman raised an eyebrow at the sound. "Let me see it."

"What?"

"Your injury. Let me see it."

"It's under my pants."

She only looked at me with an eyebrow raised.

"I'm good."

She shrugged, casually dismissive. It was up to me. She bent her head back to her work, and for a time seemed to ignore me. I used the minutes to compose myself. I dried my tears, and I let the redness in my cheeks fade away.

Bread dough rose under a cloth on the counter. From the rafters, dried herbs hung. This woman might really know something about healing. And even if she didn't, my bandages hadn't been changed in a whole day. I shuddered to see what the long ride on Flora had done to me.

"Okay," I said. I pushed myself up off the table and I dropped Timber's leather pants to my ankles. I didn't want to step out of them, in case Rommel came back through the door. I shuffled awkwardly around the table to her side. Immediately she put down her sewing and lifted the lantern that sat before her on the table. She pressed her head close, the light held high. Tender fingers unwrapped Timber's poultice. Each puncture was swollen

high and tender and crusted over with dried blood. When she saw that she tsked and shook her head.

“No, see, you can’t let them crust over like that.”

“But don’t scabs mean it’s healing?”

“These are bite marks. They go deep into the muscle. While the tops close over, the deep part is still open. That traps infection inside you. That’s how you die.”

I swallowed.

“Did you make acania tea?”

I nodded. “I had an infection, but the tea helped. Then I rode here, and I think I made it worse again.”

She nodded. “Pour the tea on a few times a day, if you can. The leaf wrap is good, but I’ll give you some cloth to use from now on. Wash it in boiled water to clean it. Can you do that?”

I laughed bitterly. “I have no idea. I have no idea what’s happening to me.”

She smiled, compassionate but detached. “If you can.”

I nodded. “Thank you. But how do I stop the wounds from closing over?”

“Keep them moist. Soak them. Massage the area, even though it’ll hurt.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

She nodded, and turned back to the table. The lantern went back down, and she picked up her sewing once more. Beside it was a pile of scrap fabric, and she tossed some over to me as I bent to pull Timber’s pants back up.

“Thanks.” I shoved the pieces into the pocket of Gran’s jacket. “Um, who are you?”

“My name is Ceylona. I am the Alpha’s wife.”

I was shocked. “His...wife? But you’re human.”

“I am.”

“Where—but--are you from the village?”

Ceylona shook her head. “No dear. I was born in the Woods.”

A human woman born in the Woods, who married a wolf and lived with his pack?

“Do, um, do a lot of them marry?”

She shrugged. "It depends on the family, I suppose. Though those who don't marry often take mates, for short times. To produce offspring."

Offspring? With human women?!

"Hey. Do you know anyone named Marta? She's a pretty brunette, very sweet person. She was taken in the attack on the village and I thought maybe—"

Ceylona shook her head. "She wasn't brought here, love. She probably made her way to Grandmother's House, if she didn't lose herself in the wild first."

The door opened and I jumped to my feet. Sharp pain shot through my leg and I grabbed the table. But it was only two small boys, who raced through the door and slammed it again behind them.

"Wash your hands before dinner," said their mother, as they rough-housed across the floor like pups.

"Where are the girls?" I wondered aloud.

"Grandmother's House." I waited, but she did not offer more.

That's okay, I'd already figured it out. "Ceylona, are there no wolves that are women?"

"The curse was only for the brothers."

A curse. Timber referenced a curse when he spoke to the Alpha. But there were no curses in the history I knew. I opened my mouth to ask, and the door banged open. Outlined by darkness stood Timber.

"Come on. It's time to go."

There was no heckling on our way out of the clearing. Instead, the wolves grouped together, heads bowed, whispering. They watched me limp away at Timber's side, and the light of the bonfire illuminated the resentment in their eyes.

The Alpha sat in his throne and watched us too, a slight frown on his forehead like he was not entirely sure he did the right thing.

14

I WAITED TO speak until the smoky haze of the fires was gone from the air. Until I believed that the dark outlines we passed were really just trees. I let the fist around my stomach unclench.

“Where are we going?” I rode Flora and Timber held the reins.

“Grandmother’s House.”

A flutter of excitement. The name alone conjured a feeling of safety in me. “What is it?”

“It’s a town.”

Incredible. I’d never known of any towns but Big Village. With the murderous Woods surrounding us on all sides, we didn’t travel far enough away to discover any. “Ceylona—the Alpha’s wife—”

“I know who she is.”

“Okay, well she said that Marta might be there.”

“She might be.” The other possibility was that she was lying dead in the Woods somewhere, like Leanna.

“Is it far?”

“Yes.”

“How far?”

“If we travel hard through the nights, you on your horse, we’ll arrive in about seven days.”

“Seven days?!” I never imagined the Woods were so vast. I tried to recall a story of Huntsmen venturing that far, and I couldn’t think of one.

“Do the Huntsmen even know about this place?”

Did Gran?

“No. Or if they do, they don’t dare go.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“The Woods are dangerous. Or haven’t you noticed?” Timber looked sidelong at me, and the corner of his mouth smirked at his own joke. It

wasn't funny, but I let out a nervous laugh. I felt strangely hot and wild. I wanted to run, to shake my arms out. Beneath my skin, bubbles popped in my blood, and my ears heard buzzing. I think it was all the terror of the last few days wearing off. Abruptly I noticed I was starving.

"I'm really hungry. I haven't eaten since we left that cottage."

Timber nodded. "We're not going to make headway tonight anyway. There's not much night left. I'm taking us back to my cave; you can eat and rest through the day. We'll head out tomorrow evening at dusk."

It sounded almost as good as a warm bath. "So, this thing you want my help with. Is it in Grandmother's House?"

Timber frowned. "Why would you ask me that?"

"You fought awfully hard to get the Alpha to send me there. There has to be a reason. You can't expect me to believe it's just altruism."

Timber looked ahead, so I could not see his face. He was silent a long time, which was one of his ways of not answering my questions. He startled me when he finally did speak, a blade in his tone. "I think you mean to say thank you."

Hot blood rushed through my limbs. He was still a wolf, and I would not thank a wolf for anything. He had his own motives for doing what he did for me, made all the more suspicious by the secret he made of them. And yet he had saved my life tonight. Of that, I was sure, and it wasn't the first time, either. Perhaps an admission of gratitude was appropriate.

What would Gran do? She would kill Timber with the axe on her back and ride to the gate. Instead, I rode willingly beside him to a destination of his choosing.

Did I go so meekly because Timber led me? Was I beginning to trust him?

I shook my head. I was going because Marta might be there. I would find her and then I would go home. I remembered the promise I made Timber: that I would help him, if I didn't have to hurt anyone or betray the village. That was all the 'thank you' I planned to offer. Still...

"Thanks." In my memory, fur grew from his skin. He tripled in size. He looked just like them.

You're a beast like us too, Rommel told him. I shuddered.

"So who is Rommel, really? Why is the Alpha afraid of him? And why does he speak so weirdly?"

“Rommel is the head of one of the four families. He’d like to be Alpha, which I’m sure you picked up on. But Erik’s family has led the pack for a long time. Rommel speaks with an accent because his father didn’t teach his pups to speak until they were quite old. Their family looks down on their own humanity, and chooses to sleep through the night, if they can.”

“You said four families. Does everyone here come from just four families? So many of them look alike.”

Timber’s voice was quiet. “Yes. There are four families that make up the pack. Or perhaps only one. There were once four brothers, and we are their descendants.”

Yes, I could see that. The dark-haired men all wore the same tattoo. The blond men stood together and looked alike.

“Someday I’ll tell you a story,” Timber said. I barely heard him.

“And the other guy? Your friend who came to rescue us?”

“Sampson is a friend and mentor of mine. It was his cabin I borrowed to try to hide you. Because he is packless, he lives far off the pack’s main scent trails. Obviously they keep a closer eye on him than I thought.”

I sat back and sighed. “So what family do *you* come from? Rommel called you packless, but you bowed to the Alpha and he listened to you. He didn’t banish you like Sampson.”

“Sampson is a cousin. We are both packless, in that we live and hunt alone. We answer to no authority but our own. But I tend to see the wisdom in not disobeying the Alpha directly, where Sampson does not. Therefore I am still welcome among the pack, while he is not.”

“So you *are* packless.”

Timber hesitated. “I respect the authority of the Alpha.”

“But you’re on your own. Why don’t you live with them?”

“I think that’s enough questions.”

I waited only a moment before asking my next one. “Why is it tradition for the pack to send women to Grandmother’s House? Why kidnap them at all if you’re only going to send them seven days away? It doesn’t make any sense.”

But Timber would not answer these, and I was left drifting in the deep sea of things I couldn’t understand.

I rode in silent frustration until I recognized the woods we walked through.

“Wait, Timber, I think I know where we are. I picked the flowers near here. We’re barely off the path.”

“It might be wise to gather more during your day, if you’re able.”

“Is your cave close?”

“We are almost there.”

My head raced. “So then, the pack’s lair must be close to the wall. I was so turned around, I couldn’t tell. I thought they must live deep in the Woods.”

“The better to attack your Huntsmen,” Timber said.

“And why do you live so close to the gate?”

“I like berry syrup. There’s a grove nearby.”

Okay, not what I expected. “So what will I do at Grandmother’s House? Learn to bake pies?”

He snorted. “I doubt that, as you’ve shown no penchant for cooking. Perhaps learn to wield that axe.”

But I’d shown no fondness for fighting either, and we both knew it.

Timber sighed. For once, he seemed tired. His bare feet moved heavy and slow. Was his skin thicker than mine, to save him from cutting them up? “When we reach Grandmother’s House, I will introduce you to a woman who will tell you what you can do to help us all. Then you will decide.”

“Then I’ll *decide*?” I said the words as if I’d forgotten what they meant. Making real choices between viable options felt like a lost dream.

“Yes, you will decide.”

We reached a creek just before dawn, and Timber descended into it to splash his face and fill my jug.

“You’ll be cold,” I said.

“I’ll turn in a minute. I’ll be fine. Can you find the cave from here?”

I shook my head. I was dizzy with fever when we left his cave, and unconscious when I first arrived. Timber pointed over the creek. “Cross. Keep the rising sun on your left. You will reach a dense thicket of pricker bushes. Turn left and follow their edge until you come to a stone face. The cave opening is there, though you may have to search.”

I nodded, but I was nervous to remember it all.

“Where will you be?”

“I’ll be back at sundown. Eat and rest. Pick flowers, if you’re able to find your way to them. Pack what you need and be ready to leave at dusk.”

And then he was out of the creek, and he broke into a loping run. In a moment he was lost in the dark and it was just Flora and me standing there drinking the fresh cold water he'd passed up to me. In the distance, a wolf howled. On the horizon, the sun sent its first rays forth. And I realized that Timber had left me alone in the Woods. He trusted me to not run away.

Flora and I stood by the creek as the sun rose. Suddenly stubborn, I did not want to prove Timber's faith well-placed. Could I find my way to the gate from here? Would the new Supreme General let me in?

Bitch, Rommel whispered in my imagination, *I hope you run*. It wasn't safe to travel more than a short distance alone.

And besides, Marta might be waiting in Grandmother's House. Timber said that I would make a choice there—a choice about what happened next. Some instinct in me believed him. And even if he were lying, it was undeniable that I was safer with Timber than I was alone.

Deliberately, I did not ask myself what Gran would do. I crossed the stream and followed Timber's directions.

15

AT SUNDOWN, TIMBER returned as promised. He walked without any limp or tiredness, seeming entirely recovered from last night's strain. I found myself envying him as I poured fresh tea on my leg and wrapped it with Ceylona's bandages. I'd slept with my wounds open, with only a cloth soaked in boiled water draped across my naked leg. This evening, the wounds were tender but not scabbed or bleeding. Just how Ceylona said they should be. When Timber appeared in the entry, I finished my wrap quickly and reached for his leather pants. They were really mine now, with my too-tight, damaged ones discarded. I didn't even pack them, instead stuffing my bag with my refreshed supply of life-saving flowers. I'd found my way to them easily, and was quite proud.

"I'm ready to go."

Timber nodded. He went into his chest. I'd already raided it for its pot and food stores, so he took only a change of clothes for himself. He rolled them tight and stuffed them into a small sack that used to contain potatoes. Then he turned to leave without a second look. I rushed to my feet and limped after him. He lifted me onto Flora and we were off.

All through the night, Timber led Flora and me through the Woods. When I thought of questions, I asked them, and he answered when he wished to. When the scenery was beautiful or strange, I pointed it out, and he smiled silently and said nothing. He wasn't the best conversationalist, and after awhile I gave up and we rode in relative silence.

My leg was stiff but tolerable. We took frequent breaks, halting at every freshwater creek we came to. Each time, Timber reached up and took me by the waist and lifted me down, and I hissed behind my teeth at the pain of it, and felt once again the width of his hands around my small waist.

About an hour before dawn, when my leg pain bordered on intolerable, Timber helped me dismount. He told me to fill my pot with water from the

stream while he picked up wood for a fire.

Soon a fire roared and the pot boiled, and I took my pants and bandages off to soak my wounds. They were angry and swollen, but the scabs were soft and easily pried open. Timber came over to peer at them in the flickering firelight, but otherwise he ignored me as I sat half-clothed. He busied himself with making us dinner, so industrious that it hardly occurred to me that he might be tired too.

When it was ready, I sat numbly and ate slowly. Dried rabbit and roasted potato. I stared at the flames and tried to remember my last great meal. Timber ate quickly, and stood as we heard the dawn howl from the distant woods. “Rest today. Tonight will be much the same. I’ll be back at sundown. If you’re up for it, see about gathering some food.”

“I don’t know what to look for.”

“Then don’t.” He shrugged as if he didn’t care, and then he loped off through the trees. I frowned at his back as he disappeared. Where was it he went during the day while I slept? An owl hooted its last and I looked over at Flora.

“Alone again,” I said.

I slept beside Timber’s fire until the sun’s light snuck around the edges of the jacket I draped over my face and blinded me through my closed lids. It was one of those days—bright and clear and demanding. Reluctantly, I threw the jacket off me and got up grumbling.

In the village, there were beverages to help you wake. Waking up there was a glorious, slow rising towards the day. Sip by sip, you came to the world. Here, I splashed freezing water on my face, shivered and swore, and then reached into my pack to munch a few nuts. Not quite the same.

The day was not only clear, but cold. Wind overpowered the unflinching sun. It shook narrow branches and found all the holes in my coat. I shivered as I sat by the dead fire. I could try to build it back up again, but the wind would threaten it all day and blow away my heat. Plus, my leg was so stiff...I wanted to move it. Loosen the muscles up before I sat for another whole night on Flora’s back.

That was how I decided to leave Flora at the camp and venture into the Woods to look for food, as Timber had suggested. I took only the small basket I’d found in his chest. It was so like the basket I had back home—the one I’d given to Gran before her last fight. I felt almost at ease, swinging it loosely in my hand, breathing in the fresh cold air. I was only tangentially

looking for food. If I found it, great, but I knew I didn't need to. Timber would come back tonight with something.

The wind turned the tip of my nose red and played with the loose fabric of my long shirt. Ginger hair escaped its bun and blew wild curling tendrils around my prickling cheeks. I laughed. And that's when I heard it—the sound of a man's voice.

Timber. But no, he's a wolf now. They all are.

My heart beat fast as I realized at the rate of molasses that this could mean only one thing. Huntsmen.

Dropping my basket, I raced towards the voice. Suddenly my leg pain seemed not so bad. The sound of their voices—for it was more than one man, speaking to each other—faded in and out as I tried to track them.

They likely would not know of Colonel Leanna's deal. They would take me back through the gate. This was my way home.

Timber brushed at the edges of my thoughts. He needed my help, he said. I shoved him aside. Marta's face appeared. But now I could rescue her with a whole team of well-armed Huntsmen.

Soon I was close. The wind carried a loud laugh, which helped me. I slowed down as they became visible across a river. I hid behind a tree and peered out at them like a denizen of the Woods sighting prey. I had to make sure they were what I thought: a patrol of Huntsmen, honorable and true.

There were four of them. Two of them had their shirts off; they were splashing themselves off in the shallows and laughing at the cold. The others drank from freshly-filled flasks. Nearby, their truck stood ready and abandoned. There must be a path just behind them, out of sight. A path back to the gate.

Should I go back and get Flora? The river was too fast and deep to cross on foot. No. They might be gone by the time I returned. I'd run to the edge and shout at them. They would find a way to me and then we'd go back for Flora together.

Yet still I hesitated behind the tree. I'd forgotten how to talk to real human people, maybe, or else I was embarrassed to approach a group of half-naked men looking like a lost forest child. Would they recognize me? Would they try to hurt me? My heart beat faster and faster as I stood frozen, considering every possibility.

The two men put on their shirts and jackets. The group retreated to the truck. I realized they would drive away and I'd lose them, and a fire lit in

my gut and I rushed out from behind the tree. I ran, crooked but determined, until the water licked my ankles.

“Hey!” I shouted. They had fired up the engine, and the wind blew the sound of my voice away.

“Hey! Over here.”

One of them began to turn. I raised my hand to wave. Then, a massive thudding impact against my lower back threw me forward, and I fell with a crash into the roiling surf of the river. My scream was cut off as water closed over my head, and I realized that the shape that descended with me was a wolf.

The river was cold and suffocating. It closed over my face and it didn’t go away. My legs beat the water and my hands reached for the sun, but the wolf had hold of my arm and would not let go. Above us the squadron of Huntsmen was so close. They could rescue me, not just from this moment but from the forest itself, from an unknown fate and from constant danger. All I had to do was catch a breath and scream. Then their eyes would turn and they would see us both. They would take me and kill the wolf.

Good riddance. Death to wolves.

But what if it’s Timber?

It couldn’t be. Why would Timber, who had always protected me, now turn on me and try to drown me? No, the wolf behind me was an enemy.

I thrashed in the water. I pressed my hands against the wolf’s fur coat, trying to push him off me. His hold was gentle, surprisingly so. Was he even piercing my skin? I tugged my arm to try and free it. I put my hands in his jaws and tried to pry them open. In response, his mouth clenched tighter. I felt the sharpness of his teeth now, even through my coat. I felt them begin to open my skin as I struggled and I didn’t care. The pain was sharp but it wasn’t important.

Inside my chest was heating up as I tried to hold in my breath. My throat felt as if it might burst open. Pressure was building in my head, above my ears. How many moments before I gulped in the river and died? My fear became panic.

I began to hit him. I slammed my fists into his shoulders, his snout—any part I could reach. I kicked at his legs, tangled in the water with my own. I thrashed and fought and I went blind with how afraid I was. The panic of having no breath, of being only seconds from dying—I’d never felt anything remotely like it in my sheltered village life. Even the violence I

survived in the rotted cottage was nothing to the experience of being an animal only heartbeats away from sure death. Every beat a countdown to the end. It blinded my vision, it took away my senses.

A wolf was trying to kill me like one did to Gran. But the squadron above was full of saviors. Maybe if I splashed enough they would realize I was here. They'd dive down and save me. I kicked and threw my arms out to make waves.

Still nothing happened. Time stretched on for eons, the heartbeats counting down, and it was a lifetime since I took a breath. Panic softened into hopelessness. The hopelessness of genuine helplessness. I was going to die, and there was nothing I could do.

Blackness replaced my vision. I opened my mouth to take a breath.

The next moment, I felt us ascending. My head crested the surface of the river and I breathed in gigantically, a heaping grateful breath of oxygen. I coughed and sputtered, and breathed again. Breathed as if it had been decades. The wolf released my arm and surfaced beside me. He kept his head low, only allowing his ears and eyes and the tip of his snout above the surface to breathe. I could see his huffing breaths in the cool air.

Shh, his expression seemed to say. I glanced right and saw that the Huntsmen were still within sight, driving down the river bed. If I made too much noise, they'd hear me. I breathed in deep, ready to scream. And then I looked for a second time at the wolf.

It was Timber. I'd barely considered it might be, but it was. Even wet, I recognized the coloring of his face. And there was something in the eyes. It was Timber who tried to drown me.

I looked down at my arm and saw blood seeping out of his teeth marks to color the water. I almost had salvation in hand, and a man who I thought cared to protect me had stopped me from reaching it. Stopped me, and then drowned me.

No, not a man.

A wolf.

Shh, he warned, and I knew if I shouted he would pull me back under. My panic was a fresh wound in my mind. I was soaking and freezing and I wanted to sob. And so I did not cry out, and in a moment the truck turned away and disappeared into the trees.

They returned home without me.

Silently as I could, I swam to the edge of the river and climbed out. Hands shaking, I wrung out my hair while the wolf shook himself to dry his fur. Then he stood there and studied me, curiosity in his eyes.

I shook uncontrollably in the biting wind. I felt scoured by rage and terror, beset by weakness and some insanity. Irrationally, I imagined curling up against his huge furry frame and crying. Instead, I walked silently towards camp.

The wolf followed at a distance. I was so glad he couldn't speak.

I filled the rest of the day with chores. I gathered enough wood for three nights, although we'd be here less than one. I brushed down Flora as best I could with cold fingers and fallen pine cones. The wolf followed me back and watched me for a time, and when he was sure I would stay he left again, to return after dark.

While he was gone I re-dressed my leg. I took off my jacket and I stared at the pinprick holes he'd bit in my arm. The water running over them had made them look bloodier than they were; they were almost nothing. Just a dozen dots spaced out across my upper arm, just below the deeper ones already healing in my shoulder. It was only the punctures in Gran's leather coat that would never heal.

Suddenly, panic seized my throat and I felt it again: the suffocating press of the water. I took deep ragged breaths of air. The flood of oxygen transformed my terror into rage, and I threw Gran's jacket on the ground and reached savagely for my axe.

The left sleeve of the coat was ruined. Ripped at the shoulder seam and dotted with holes. With a shout, I slammed the axe down on the seam and split it. I slammed into it again, and again. Beneath the jacket were rocks and roots. I was ruining the axe blade. I could not care. I cut at the leather with sharp cries until tears came and the sleeve was severed. Then I collapsed on the ground beside the ruined heirloom and reached out for it with shaky fingers. Slowly, I pulled the jacket back around my shoulders. It was marked forever by my time in the Woods, like I was. I left the discarded sleeve on the ground.

At sundown, the wolf returned with a rabbit dangling from his human hand. He lit a fire and he roasted the rabbit while I sat in sullen silence, helping him with nothing.

An eternity later, the rabbit was cooked, and he came around the fire to hand me my share. When I went to take it, he would not let go. I tugged at

my food and resented him.

“What happened today?” he said.

I considered not answering. Perhaps I was done speaking to him forever. But I was bursting with not speaking. I craved to scream and shout and blame him the way I craved air. The truth came flying out of me, and with it came tears to roll down my cheeks. The tears of a living creature suffering helplessness inside the embrace of someone she had accidentally come to trust.

“You almost drowned me, that’s what happened.”

“Why did you go after the Huntsmen? You would’ve gotten us killed.”

“They wouldn’t have killed me! *You* almost did!”

“The scouts the Alpha has following us, the ones meant to ensure we reach Grandmother’s House as I promised, would have killed us and them the second you stepped onto that truck.”

I blinked. I hadn’t known there was anyone watching us. “Yeah, well I’d rather actually fight for my life than be held down like a helpless animal while you drown me to death.”

“You mean you’d rather watch men fight and die for you than be saved from your own idiocy.”

I blanched. His words were a new shock of cold water. What had I thought he’d say to me? Did I expect an apology? Some expression of regret for his violence and cruelty? If not for nearly killing me, then for scaring me so much?

Yes, I did.

The man who was a wolf shifted on his feet. For a fleeting moment I thought he might bend down and put his hand on my back and rub it like my Gran used to. Perhaps issue that apology, or at least ask about my arm and look guiltily at the missing sleeve of the cherished scarlet jacket.

Instead he only released my food and went to stand at the edge of the fire’s light. He watched the moon cast its eerie blue gaze.

“You’re welcome,” he said, and then he walked away.

My rage rose like a stoked fire. *You’re welcome*?! Was he serious??!

I wanted to punch him and scream and cry and collapse. I was so not prepared for this. I was literally not prepared for the challenges of these Woods, for death and fear and danger. After all, life in Big Village was constructed to ensure that I would never have to face these things. It’s what

the Huntsmen and the Wall of Thorns and my Gran were all there for. To protect and shelter me.

All those years, I thought I knew fear. A shiver of feeling when Gran left on patrol, or the bells rang, or a howl sounded too close. But I'd never really felt afraid. All those protections existed to keep me, not just from harm, but from ever truly feeling frightened or helpless.

And now they were gone.

16

ALL I WANTED was to be far away from Timber. But of course, we had progress to make towards Grandmother's House. And so after I ate my rabbit, Timber returned to snuff out the fire and set us on the invisible path once more.

I hated the moment he put his hands around my waist to lift me onto Flora. I resolved to need few breaks, so that it would not happen too often.

As before, Timber walked, and I followed his path. Unlike before, this night he walked ahead and I stayed behind him. We were too far apart to speak, which was just how I wanted it. I didn't have to look at the face he used to trick me into thinking he was a human. Flora followed him passively, but never had I felt more sure I was in the presence of a wolf.

As we walked silently through the bitter night, I rubbed the arm that now had no leather to warm it, and I tried to study the forest. I looked for anything that might give me a clue how Timber knew to come this way. An obvious rock. A winding stream. Though we passed these sorts of things, I saw nothing to suggest he used them to guide our path. I tried to mark them in my memory anyway, so I might one day find my way back home on my own. But even as I did it, I saw that dream for the hopeless thing it was.

I no longer believed Timber offered agency and choice. He must know that I would not choose to help him. Not anymore. So he wouldn't offer me the chance to say no.

I denied every break he offered me. With each denial, his lips tightened further, and I wondered if perhaps he needed a break himself. *If he does, he can admit it or he's not getting one.* I urged Flora on even though my leg burned and I needed to stop and soak my wounds.

Once during the night, Timber stopped short and held up his hand in the air.

“What?”

“Shh—”

I did not want to obey him, but I did it automatically. I listened for whatever it was he heard. He looked right, peering for long minutes into the dark. Flora seemed to sense it too. She shifted on her feet and looked in the same direction, whinnying nervously. I heard nothing, and soon Timber began to walk again, without another word.

When dawn approached, Timber stopped. Up came his hands to guide me off Flora, and the hatred I felt in my heart for him burned in my chest like acid. I snuck away from him as soon as I was on the ground. I relieved myself and checked my wounds. They were angry, itchy and dry. I cared for Flora’s needs while Timber made us our fire and a meager dinner from the supplies in my pack. He’d chosen a spot by a stream, like always, and he collected water to boil in the pot. I threw my flowers in.

When the water was ready, I poured some on a cloth and removed my pants. I sat on the ground soaking my leg and eating his simple dinner, waiting for the sun to rise.

Neither of us spoke. Though I watched Timber across the fire as if I wished my eyes were arrows, he would not look at me at all. Shortly before dawn, he stood and broke the silence.

“Come on,” he said.

“What? Where?” My guard was up and my breath came fast. I no longer knew what to expect from him. He was like an enemy and a stranger at once.

“I need to show you what you’ll do today.”

“It’s not up to you what I do.”

At that, his eyes locked with mine and he gave me a strange look. Sad, and also like I was the silliest little girl he’d ever seen. *Of course it’s up to me*, those yellow eyes said. My rage pounded in my heart as I discarded the wet cloth and rose to my feet.

“Fine.” I pulled on my pants and went to mount Flora.

“No, leave her be. It’s not far.” He turned away and began to walk. As I had all day, I followed behind him. Limping at first, but as I walked, the stiffness went out of my leg and I found myself feeling grateful for the opportunity to move.

It was a short walk. Dawn was still not with us when Timber stopped and turned back to me. He held up the torch he carried to illuminate the forest. “Could you find this again from the camp?”

I hesitated, and then nodded. I'd paid attention on our walk as I had on Flora's back today. I was learning how to tell direction from the sky, how to pick out and remember trail markers. For a moment my heart swelled happily and I felt proud.

"Good. I want you to come here after you get your sleep and pick us berries." His torch lit up a thicket of bushes. "Careful of the thorns." He reached out and plucked a small berry from the vine. He held it out to me. "You see this?" I had to lean near him to see it. The berry looked tiny in the broad palm of his hand. It was perfectly round and smooth, a blue shade like deep water.

I nodded.

"This is what you want." With the torch, he looked about, taking a few steps. He bent down and plucked another berry, and held his hand out to me once more. Reluctantly, I went to him and bent to see what he showed me. "These are poison. Be careful not to take them. You see the difference?"

I studied the poison berry carefully. It was blue too, though its color was not quite as deep. Though mostly round, it came to a slight point on one end, and across its back I saw spots of red.

"Yes."

"Good. They always grow together in the Woods, but one will kill you and one makes delicious syrup. I think we could use a little sweet syrup, don't you?"

I glanced up in surprise at his friendliness, his light tone. He spoke casually and easily for a man who hadn't spoken to me for a whole day. But I was not ready to reciprocate. In response to his overture I said nothing, and the moment grew long and drew into silence.

"I'll see you tonight," he finally said. I thought I heard tiredness in his voice, and a sadness in his eyes when he handed me the torch and turned away.

"Where are you going?"

"I'll be back at sundown."

"Aren't you afraid I'll run away again?"

"You're not that stupid."

My heart beat with anger again, and I found myself unable to just let him walk away. He took a step from me and I took a step to follow. "You told me there are enemies tracking us, but still you leave me alone. Maybe today it won't be you that tries to hurt me; it'll be them."

His answering voice was ice. “The Alpha’s scouts watch you, but they will not hurt you unless you try to leave the Woods. The Alpha gave you to Grandmother’s House; they watch to ensure you get there. Don’t do anything reckless again and you can consider them a protective detail. Rommel won’t dare attack us with them watching.”

“So you say. But I don’t think anyone’s here at all. I think you just—”

Suddenly, Timber spun and took a step forward. His chin was in my face, his lips only inches from my forehead. I could feel the heat of him against my chest, and my breathing came fast and heavy at the surprise of his closeness. His voice was a breath, sharp and pointed. “I just what, Red? I just wanted to nearly drown you? Do you think it gave me some thrill to make you more afraid of me?”

“I—” At first I had no answer. His closeness robbed me of my rage, my surety. It stole my breath and my conviction. As his chest pressed close, I could feel the strength in his muscles. And his spirit was as strong as his body. He’d used that strength to protect me, until yesterday. Like river water, the memory of my terror and rage flooded my mind.

“No. I think you’re so determined for my help that you wanted to stop me from going home. You wanted what was best for you, and not me. Well guess what? You won’t get it now. You said I had a choice, and after yesterday I will not choose to help you.”

Timber’s eyes flashed. He stepped back and ran with a loping gait into the Woods.

Dawn broke without the usual distant howl. I guess we were too far away to hear it. I slept, and then I picked the berries for him. One tiny berry at a time.

They stained my fingertips blue as the back of my neck burned in the sun. As I twisted the fruit off its vine, I found to my surprise that I didn’t really mind at all. In fact, a day of picking berries felt nice. Almost normal, like when Marta and I visited the orchards in the farming sector to collect fruit for her pies. I lost myself in the repetition, noticing only when my basket threatened overflow.

That night Timber boiled them into a delicious syrup, which he served over grits. As he cooked, he narrated his steps, and I got the distinct impression he was teaching me how to do it myself. After, there were berries left over, and Timber seemed pleased.

“I didn’t expect you to pick so many. Put them in your pack—carefully, so they don’t get crushed. We’ll eat well the next few nights.”

Before dawn came again, Timber brought me to a grove and showed me how to harvest nuts. I spent a day foraging for those, and when the sun went down, he made us dinner from what he’d hunted and I’d gathered. He insisted I make the fire, guiding me in the steps until the flames roared in the darkness.

He taught me to tell edible fungi from poisonous. Mushrooms poked through the forest detritus like small orange lamplights; he pointed to them as we walked. Each time a new variety appeared, he lifted me off Flora so I could kneel to see.

“Foraging for these is risky. Harder than gathering fruit or nuts, because the wrong kind will kill you and they can be hard to tell apart. For now, don’t eat any without clearing them with me first. You see this shape here...” His long fingers cupped the mushroom’s cap, and I leaned close to see the fine details he showed me.

Each night he stopped our travels sooner than the one before, extending the time we spent making camp. He continued to narrate his food preparation, though I shook my head when he asked if I’d like to skin the rabbit. When I spent a day picking fungi, he applauded me for bringing him only one poison one, though I told him that dead once was still dead. Making the fire became my job.

He taught me other lessons as we walked. How to read direction and time from the moon. How to turn our surroundings into markers in my mind to help me navigate. He pointed to trees and flowers and bushes and gave me their names and uses. He went back to walking beside me, and I leaned over to learn from his slow, quiet narration.

I forgot how angry I was. The memory of my terror receded and the wonder of the forest eased into the space where it had been.

By the fourth night, Timber’s lessons had increased my awareness of my surroundings. Always my eyes were roving, my ears listening. And I still barely glimpsed the small yellow eyes tracking me from the trees. An hour later, they appeared again.

“We’re being watched,” I said quietly.

“That’s Geor,” Timber said simply. “Or Seamus. They’ve been tailing us since we left the Alpha.”

“Are you sure? You’re sure it’s not Rommel or one of his guys?”

Timber raised his eyebrows at me and said nothing. I took that to mean he was sure.

I glanced again in the direction of the eyes. “Well, why don’t they come out of the dark and walk with us? It’s creepy being stalked.”

“You want to share our fire and food with the Alpha’s spies? How generous.”

I pursed my lips. Not what I meant and he knew it. I just wanted to see Geor’s face. To know it was him for myself.

“Hey,” I shouted into the trees. “Geor, right? And Seamus. How about you come out so I can see your faces?”

Timber stopped Flora. He was shaking his head. I looked past him at the yellow-eyed shadow as it crystallized into the shape of a man, naked and familiar.

“Geor. Good to see you again.” My voice shook on the lie. “How are you enjoying our walk?”

“It *almost* got exciting.” His tone was cold and his eyes were bright. I remembered the last words I’d heard him speak. *Let them take their pleasure from her pain*, he’d advised the Alpha. I swallowed.

“Okay, um, thanks for coming out. You can, um, go back to stalking me now.”

Geor smirked at Timber, who stood there with a stone face. Then he melted back into the trees and I couldn’t even find his eyes. Timber tugged Flora’s reins, starting our walk once more. For a while we walked in silence.

I believed him now. Geor would never have let me escape. Timber did what he had to do to stop a bloodbath. He had told me the truth.

The anger broke in me after that. My resolve to hate him crumbled. And so when Timber suggested he teach me to use my axe, I found myself nodding before I stopped to think. Nodding fervently, as if it was all I ever wanted.

“But I dulled it, I think.”

“Then we’ll start with how to sharpen it.”

I looked at the moon. How much time was left in the night? How much longer would he make us walk before he stopped to teach me?

But Timber seemed almost as eager as I was, and we made camp with hours of dark left. He searched out a large flat rock and brought me to it. I

sat down beside it and unsheathed the axe. Timber showed me how to run the blade down the rock at an angle, and then he handed it to me to try.

“Tell me what you can do with an axe,” he said as I worked methodically, following the movement of the sharp blade without blinking.

“Nothing. I really can’t use one at all.”

“Tell me precisely what that means.”

“I mean, I’ve never thrown an axe before. Well, once, in a game at a pub. And when I try swinging it...it doesn’t do much. That wolf you saved me from—I tried to kill him with it. I hit him with the flat side instead of the blade.”

“You used one against Rommel’s men on your first night in the Woods.”

“Yeah, I just swung like crazy and I cut the guy a little. I had more luck with the bone.”

Timber frowned. “The bone?”

I nodded. “There was a pile of decaying bodies on the floor. Old prey, probably. Rats and rabbits. I grabbed a sharp bone and stabbed one of them in the eye. I think that’s the one who found me later, because the wolf who caught me had an injured eye.”

To me, it was something to be ashamed of. A failure to defend myself, and when Timber started laughing—quietly at first, then rising louder and louder—I felt my blood burn hot and I frowned at him.

“Stop,” I said. If he could even hear me over the roar of his laughter. But when he finally stopped and looked at me once more, he had a curious expression on his face.

“Red, if you can escape a pair of wolves bent on killing you with a rat bone, then I shudder to think what you will do with an axe once you truly know how to use one.”

Pride swelled unexpectedly in me. He wasn’t laughing at me. He was... admiring. It didn’t seem possible.

The moonlight was bright above us and the whole world was made of blue and silver shapes. Shadows danced with the moon’s iridescent light under the living canopy.

I’d come to love the Woods at night. Wolves only prowled under the light of the sun, but so many other animals visited us on our nightly patrols. Hooting creatures with big round eyes and rustling wings. Small four-legged critters covered with fur made mischief on the ground. Tiny mice were nothing but pinpricks of light from their eyes, and deer flicked their

tails and grazed. The humming of insects made music in the air, and the stars blinked through the canopy more brightly than they ever had inside the lit-up village.

Timber took our second axe for himself and led me to a nearby tree. “Once you throw your axe, you’ve lost it. It’s a last resort, and I’m not going to teach you to do it tonight. Tonight, you’re just going to lift the axe, and bury it in the tree.”

I blinked. Even I could do that. But apparently not. For I lifted the axe and slammed it down against the tree trunk, and it bounced off. I had hit it with the side of the blade, and Timber corrected my grip and had me try again. This time it sank in about an inch and I felt elated. Then Timber lifted his and buried it besides mine, and it sank in so far it took all the muscles in his bunched shoulder to pry it out again.

“You have to be strong to swing an axe, Red. But it’s about more than strength.” Apparently it also had to do with confidence, angle of the swing, and form. Aim for the inside core of the tree, not the bark itself, he said. We tried until my shoulder ached.

Only when I could apply enough force to do some damage did he teach me to aim. And when I could do that, we moved off the tree.

“Hit that pine cone on the ground. Angle your body like this, to harness power from your core. Try it again. Good. Now take that branch off. You’ll need to alter your form to reach high...” I swung for the thin thing over and over until it came down.

My jacket came off quickly as I perspired heavily in the night autumn air. My leather pants were thick and lacked stretch. I wondered for the first time why the Huntsmen wore such an insensible uniform.

“The thickness of the leather is like armor,” Timber answered when I asked him. “It protects against scratches and grazes. Your Huntsmen are forever scratching themselves on brambles and thorns, not to mention the protection it provides against a nick from an irresponsible axe swing or the claws of a wolf that got just a little too close.”

But they don’t exactly breathe,” I complained.

“Come on, I think we’re done for the night. Get a drink at the creek and soak your leg.”

I was disappointed but grateful, exhausted but enthusiastic about the lesson. I was impressed too with how my leg held up. It supported my athleticism even after a night of riding. When I checked the wounds, I

found them mostly closed. Soon I could stop stripping my pants off three times a night. And my left shoulder, though used heavily tonight, had not bled. Maybe there really was magic in those blue flowers.

“Hey, thanks,” I told Timber as we walked together towards the creek. Since entering the Woods I’d felt helpless. Now I felt it a little bit less.

He nodded and said nothing, only patronizing me with his smile as I gulped down water like a starving fish. Now that my muscles had cooled, I felt shaky and tired, all used up.

“Sun’s nearly up,” he said. I knew what came next.

“What do you do during the day? Why are you always leaving? Where do you go?”

Timber looked surprised, and then he frowned and looked away.

“What? Tell me. You’re always going off. But I never know what you’re doing.”

“I’ll be back at sundown.”

“Tell me!” I decided I’d sit there until he did, only partly because of how good it felt to not be standing up.

Timber would not make eye contact. A brooding expression fell over his face. It displeased him when I wouldn’t let things go. But still I sat by the creek, splashing my hand lazily on the surface of the water, as if his reaction did nothing to me.

“I sleep,” he said finally.

“What?”

“I sleep nearby while you’re sleeping. And then I watch you. Make sure you’re safe.” He rose and took a determined step away.

“No, wait. That makes no sense.”

He turned back and raised his eyebrows. His irritation was written all over his face. “Doesn’t it? I’m up all night with you. Do you think we don’t need sleep?”

I’d never thought about it before. “But, why don’t you sleep in our camp by the fire?”

His eyes pierced mine, and I saw the truth in the frustration and compassion written there.

“Oh.” My voice was quiet. I knew, suddenly, why he left. He left to avoid the fear that shimmered in my eyes when I looked at him and saw only a monster.

“But—” I almost told him I was not afraid of his wolf form. How could I be, when I knew it was still him? But I caught the lie before it came out.

“Good girl,” he said quietly. “At least you admit the truth.”

I cast my eyes down, ashamed, as the sun threatened the horizon. I hadn’t admitted it; not exactly. But in not denying it, I’d come close enough.

17

I TRIED TO sleep. I built a fire and piled it with fuel. I curled up next to it, hugged my body tight, and wished for an extra blanket. But I couldn't sleep.

Was Timber watching me right now? Was he dozing just beyond the nearest trees? If I walked the perimeter of our camp, would I find him curled up and warm inside his fur?

I fell into a restless slumber. I dozed for a few hours but woke quickly and easily at every noise. Eventually I gave up and lay there in the brightening day. It was cloudy today. I stared up and hoped it wouldn't rain.

As I lay there, a restlessness grew in me. I had to stand up and move. I ate a quick breakfast, and then I went for my axe. My back ached and my upper arms burned, and yet I wanted to keep practicing. I wanted to feel the hurt in my muscles as I loosened them. I wanted to throw my frustration at the bark of the trees. One after another, I cut them up. Sap seeped from the wounds, smearing my bare skin. Breathing heavy, I felt more free. I took up my basket and went for a walk.

Was he following me now? Perhaps my labors with the axe woke him up. Would he tell me I did well, or criticize the work he watched from the shadows? I told myself I didn't care, but it was a lie.

When Timber returned, I was deep in thought. Water boiled on a fire I'd maintained all day. The food I gathered from the forest was cooking. He handed me his day's catch—fish today—and then went to the fire to warm his hands. They looked chapped and pale. Had he been cold, staying away from its warmth when there was little sun? Tiny drops of rain fell, making the world damp.

His fish cooked quickly, and in only a few minutes I handed him a plate. "Thank you." He set to eating silently.

“I was raised to fear wolves, you know.” Across the flames he watched me as I poured out the thoughts I’d pondered all day without him. “A wolf took off my Gran’s arm while I watched. You massacred hundreds in our village while I listened. I saw the bodies after. On our streets there is paint, marking the blood you’ve spilled in years past. They taught me the stories in school when I was a little girl.

“And the stories are true. When you’re a wolf, you are a weapon. Powerful enough to kill me in a heartbeat. I’m literally helpless standing beside you. And that’s how you made me feel that day in the water. Utterly helpless. I think I have a right to feel afraid.”

“A right?” He snorted, as if this was funny. I couldn’t see why.

“Yes, a right. You don’t think so?”

“Red, I think you have a right to whatever feelings you have. I’m not sure they’re fair, but you have a right to them.”

“Okay, but they are fair, because my whole life—”

“Red. Have I ever harmed you?”

I hesitated.

“You weren’t harmed in the water, Red,” he said quietly. “You were only scared.”

I swallowed. This was true, and I couldn’t deny it, but the fear felt so big in me still. It was hard to think of it as ‘only’ anything. My voice sounded so much younger than my age. “No, you’ve never harmed me.”

“Are you afraid of me right now?”

I studied him across the fire. There were those huge muscles in his shoulders, and those hands he used to lift me onto Flora. There was that tendril of dark hair curling over his yellow eye, and those sharp teeth that showed when he smiled. I remembered him plucking delicate fruits with his fingertips and holding them out to me. “No, I’m not.”

“And when I had an axe in my hand last night, were you afraid?”

We’d spent hours together, him swinging an axe right past my skull and me just excited to be learning from him. The answer was easy. “No.”

“Then why be afraid of me in the daylight?”

“I-I just told you. I was taught as a child—”

Timber sighed and hucked the remnants of his dinner into the fire. The fat made it flare.

“What? That’s not valid to you or something?”

He stood, brushing his hands on his pants. I went around the fire towards him.

“You think it’s unfair to be afraid of a massive beast—”

He turned towards me so suddenly that I took a step back simply to stop us from colliding. I expected to see fury in his eyes when he spoke to me, for his body was coiled tight and his breathing was heavy. But in his eyes there was only sadness, and his voice was quiet. “I’m not a beast. I am a man. The wolf you see during daylight is still me, and no more likely to hurt you than I am standing here now. You want me to apologize to you for what I am, but I will not apologize for having teeth. I am not ashamed or afraid of my nature, for in any form, in darkness and light, I am the same.”

With that, he walked briskly past me. He went to Flora’s side and made sure all was ready for the next leg of our journey. I felt sick at the thought of walking alongside him all night without speaking, *again*. But what else could I do? His hands were still cold as he lifted me up. I almost didn’t need the help anymore. The punctures in my leg were nearly closed, and I suspected I could mount on my own. Somehow I hadn’t told him.

Tonight there were no lessons. No comments on the sounds of nocturnal animals. Instead I was alone with my thoughts and he was alone with his. With every breath of cool moist air I took in, a conviction solidified. By the time the sky turned from deep to lighter purple, my head was quiet and my heart was certain. I was ready for something I never thought I’d be ready for.

He started our fire, even though that was usually my task now. I took potatoes from our bag and passed them to him as the fire burst to life. He took them from me without a word. Casting his gaze east, he calculated the time left before the sun rose. We’d ridden straight through the night, with few breaks. He didn’t have more than a few minutes before he’d change.

The potatoes would take too long to cook. Timber put them on the fire anyway—I would eat them at midday. Then he stuffed his face with nuts and dried fruit and he turned to run, like always. I rushed around the fire to stop him.

“Red, what are you doing?”

“I think you should sleep here today.”

“Why? Why would I do that?” He was irritable and tired.

“Just stay, okay? I—”

“You what? You what, Red? You’ve been taught since childhood to fear my kind. That’s what you said, right? How could you ever be expected to overcome such conditioning? Ever expected to—”

“To see that you’re nothing like the monster I was taught you are?” I stood tall and locked onto his piercing eyes. In his mouth, the points of his teeth glimmered in the rising light.

Our gazes tied us together as if with invisible rope. Then the sun hit him, and he began to lengthen. I took an involuntary step back. Instantly, I burned with shame. I resumed eye contact and made myself watch as he changed. Light grey fur sprouted over his face, and then his nose bloated and raced towards me.

He towered over me, a giant. The bones in his joints cracked and shifted and he fell forward onto four legs. This brought his teeth within a foot of my face, and he curled his upper lip and showed them as the change finished. My heart pounded at the sight of them, and an automatic, conditioned fear froze my body.

“My, what big teeth you have,” I said shakily, trying to sound completely chill and cool with it.

How did I know he was no more likely to hurt me as a wolf than as a man? I didn’t. I had only his word. He’d been a wolf when he held me beneath the river. His teeth and his power imprisoned me. Now I literally handed him my life by standing so close. And yet my limbs were frozen into cold steel pipes and I couldn’t move but to shake.

I tried to breathe. I tried to calm myself, and summon reasonable thoughts. Timber could have killed me when he found me unconscious. He could have let the Alpha or Rommel kill me. He could have harmed me any time the sun was up. He never did, because he didn’t want to harm me. There was no reason to think he’d harm me now.

This creature before me was the man I knew. Timber. He’d taught me to wield an axe, make fire, find food, and chart a path through the Woods. He’d saved my life over and over. I didn’t understand why, but he was committed to my survival.

But I could not feel these truths in my body. Panic had me in its grip, and all fact and reason could not release its hold. I was drowning in the foggy morning. His bigness blocked the sun out. Desperate, I looked up and I saw his face.

His yellow eyes were the same. There he was in them. There was that compassion and sadness I'd seen in his human face only last night. It hurt him to see me afraid like this. Slowly, he backed away and sat down on his hind legs.

Just like that, I could breathe again. A burst of laughter escaped me, and then a roll of laughter, and then I was bent over, leaning on my knees and laughing. Vaguely, I knew that the release from fear was the true source of my laughter, but still I laughed and laughed.

I looked again into Timber's eyes and I saw the question as clearly as if he'd asked it out loud.

"You just look so silly sitting like that. Like a giant dog."

He growled, baring his teeth.

"Sorry, sorry, is that offensive to compare you to a dog?" I tried to look contrite, but in a moment I was bent over laughing like crazy again.

Timber waited, unmoving.

Finally I felt purged. Something like calm descended on me.

Why were wolves so terrifying? Oh, well because of their teeth and their size and their strength. Because they could kill a human in a heartbeat, and sometimes they did. Some of them were truly monsters.

But Timber was unlike other wolves in one way. One way that mattered. Timber would not harm me. Not even in that water had he harmed me. He'd scared me, and likely saved my life.

I could stay afraid of wolves. I probably should. But Timber was in a category apart.

I had an idea. I approached Timber the wolf and looked him over closely. Curiosity came into his eyes, but he sat still. On one side of his stomach I found what I was looking for. A patch of white fur, an indistinct blob in the grey. Unthinking, I reached out my hand to touch it, and he almost jumped a mile.

I pulled my hand back instantly. "Sorry! I wasn't thinking. I shouldn't touch you." As a man, I never would have; why should it be any more okay now? "I just—I was wondering about that fur patch. Is that always there?"

He nodded, and I relaxed. For I knew that if I could find that spot and know this wolf was Timber, then I could remember not to be afraid. Suddenly I felt very tired.

"I want to sleep," I said. I lay down by the fire and arranged my only blanket over me. Timber took a spot across the fire and put his head in the

leaves. I realized with sudden surprise that his presence made me feel safer falling asleep.

Would I ever know where he'd gone all those days? How far he ranged and how alone I was? I looked into his eyes before I closed mine to sleep, and in them I saw the answer. I'd been right to imagine him just out of sight, watching over me from the shadows.

"Thank you," I found myself saying. And then I closed my eyes, and I let myself sleep beside the wolf.

18

“WE’RE APPROACHING GRANDMOTHER’S House.” It was our eighth night and I expected the news. But around us in the Woods there was no sign of human habitation. Into the gloam I peered, expecting to see roof lines in the distance, a beaten path...something.

In my ears, the static of a fast-running river was the only thing of note.

“I don’t see anything.”

“Look again.”

I looked right. It was an ordinary patch of forest. Although, the ground did seem to have collapsed into a steep slope, making the way impassable. On my left, a sea of thick brambles formed nature’s wall. The only way we could go was forward. Forward, towards the wide, white-water river that appeared ahead.

“Which way? They’re all blocked.”

Timber nodded, satisfied with my observation. “Grandmother’s House takes its protection seriously. It has only one approach.”

“So which way?”

“Over the river.”

White water crashed and foamed over rocks. The static roar was a buzzing in my ears.

Unbidden, the memory rose in my mind of the last time I’d entered a river with Timber. The panic of having no breath. The terror as his jaws closed and held me under. The water had been cold and merciless, and him even more so. Every sensation of it came back to me, and I stood frozen on the bank of this river as if it was that one. My breaths came heavy and fast; I could see each puff in the cold night air. My eyes darted down the river and back, hoping to see a bridge. There had to be one, because I could not cross that water with him. I was frozen to the ground like an ancient rock.

Timber saw my terror. There was no compassion in his slight frown, yet I knew he understood what I was thinking. For awhile he let me stand there, saying nothing.

Finally, I summoned my voice. “Where do we cross?”

“There is a path where it’s shallow enough to walk.”

My breathing came faster. I found I was shaking my head. “There’s got to be another way we can go.”

“There isn’t. This is the only approach. How do you think they’ve hidden from your Huntsmen all this time?”

Huntsmen came in trucks and leather. They did not cross water well.

Like me.

My throat burned with acid and I swallowed it back. I thought of going home, of just turning away from Timber right now and making my slow way back to the village. I’d camp outside the gate in the snow. I’d pound my fist bloody until they let me back in.

“Look, I can’t cross,” I said. I tried to sound reasonable and sane, not like my blood was on fire and panic had me in its clutches.

Timber studied me. His face was blank and unknowable. Did he feel sorry for me, ashamed of me, offended by my fear of him? I had no idea.

“Red,” he said quietly. “This is the way forward. You’re either strong enough for it, or you’re not.”

He walked to the bank and pointed out ahead. “The path is there. You have to stay strong against the current, but I’ll hold you. Once on the other side, we’re virtually there. We can dry off by a fire in a real hearth.”

“Do you really have to hold me? I can cross on Flora.”

“She doesn’t have enough experience with this kind of terrain. The water is rapid, and the path is narrow. If she slipped off it, you’d be swept downriver before I could catch you. I need you to let me guide you.”

So the only way across was with his long fingers around my waist. Alone, perhaps I could brave it. But to trust him like this...

You’re either strong enough for it, or you’re not.

That’s what the Woods was, wasn’t it? A constant test of strength and fortitude. So far I’d survived, though barely. I’d faced danger and near death and injury...and yet, this challenge felt different.

It was the choice that made it different. When Rommel and his men took me captive, I had no choice but to fight and flee. Since that night I’d fought for my survival, reacting as best I could to each new threat. Now,

here, I had a real choice for perhaps the first time since I decided to seek the acania for Gran. I could choose to move forward despite my fear, or I could turn back.

Turn back to what? I had no home anymore. Between the closed gate and me was a vast forest of prowling wolves. In Grandmother's House, I might find Marta. I might pay Timber back for his life-saving help. Would I turn from that because of a little water?

"Fine," I said. "Let's do this." The rushing river water buzzed in my ears. My insides were quivering jelly, but I held my chin high, thinking of Gran.

Timber nodded. He seemed pleased, though my shaking must be clear to see. "We'll go as soon as it's light. Would you like a snack—"

"No, no, I thought we were going now." I might lose my nerve if we waited, plus the thought of him in the water as a wolf was too much like last time. His teeth closing on my arm to guide me forward. To pull me under until I couldn't breathe.

"I'll be stronger in my other form. With all the rain, the current right now is formidable. I need to hold onto you and Flora both. I'd rather wait."

"No, I want to go now. You're either strong enough or you're not, Timber. Which is it?" I threw his own words back at him. I was lashing out, taking my fear out on him, but in the moment it felt like a battle raged, my will against his. Or maybe it was really a battle between my will and my own weakness.

Of course, his answer was calm and contained. "The difference between us, Red, is that I know how strong I am, and how strong I'm not. It is responsibility, and not fear, that makes me wait. We will wait until day."

I breathed hard in and out, and tears threatened my eyes. I stood stiffly, holding my ground, but there he was defeating me with his quiet words and firm resolve. However strong I was, I wasn't even close to as strong as he was. Timber had an inner strength forged from a lifetime in the Woods; I was soft as the bread the village baker baked.

"If we wait, I won't be able to do it." I could hear the tears thickening my wavering voice.

"Nonsense. The sun will be up soon. Shall I tell you a story while we wait?"

His question startled me. I suddenly felt like that little girl who used to wrap around Gran's waist and listen wide-eyed to her familiar tales. I

welcomed the feeling. It meant safety. I'd take that illusion for a time.

I nodded.

Timber hesitated, as if unsure whether he wanted to proceed now that he'd offered. He began with a halting start, his gruff voice out of practice with the cadence of storytelling. At least he knew how to begin.

“Once upon a time, there was a village in the middle of the woods. The villagers lived in harmony with these woods and their creatures. They cut wood for their houses, and hunted rabbit for their supper, and enjoyed the shade of the trees on hot days.

“Then one day, a man with yellow eyes came to the village. Yellow eyes, and pointed ears, and pointed teeth.”

I smiled. It was Gran's favorite tale. I knew it like my own name, and the familiar images relaxed me.

“The yellow-eyed man brought with him strange magics. The magics of potions, of bubbling liquids of all colors in glass vials of all shapes. He set up shop in a two-story building near the center of town and called himself an apothecary. Villagers went to him seeking spells to cure their ailments, and he pressed powders into their hands and whispered the magic words. When they asked him why his eyes were yellow, he told them it was a spell long ago that had done it. Sharpened his teeth and his ears and his mind too, it had, and he smiled his feral smile.

“Now, this apothecary wanted to marry a local girl, a blond beauty, the daughter of the butcher. She had her own small talent with herbs and potions, which perhaps is what attracted him. But the girl was smart, and she knew that to marry the stranger would be a mistake. He asked for her hand and she denied him.

“The yellow-eyed man fell into a quiet rage. He closed his shop and worked only upstairs. Bubbles issued from the windows of his workshop, and people on the streets looked up and spoke in low, delighted tones about what he might be up to. For months, the gossipers conjectured, and the yellow-eyed man did not come down.

“Then one day he did. He opened up his shop again, and he strode over to the home of the butcher and he asked the girl, once again, for her hand. More sure than ever, she refused. The yellow-eyed man smiled, and then he grabbed her and took her back to his home. Later, when asked, the cleric who performed the ceremony would say he was drugged, and magic was

worked upon him that made him do it. The silvers found in his home somewhat belied his story.

“That night, as expected, the girl’s four brothers marched over to the apothecary’s house and knocked upon his shop door. Each was eager to defend his sister. The oldest brother carried an axe, for he was a woodcutter. The next carried a cleaver, for he sought to learn his father’s trade. The third was a hunter who brought his bow. The youngest carried nothing, for all he had were his words.

“The yellow-eyed man greeted them warmly, calling them “brother,” and he let them into his shop. Nobody knows what came to pass then, but in an hour or two the brothers emerged, their weapons unbloodied, and returned home. Nobody saw their sister, and nobody saw, in the dim evening light, if their eyes were yellow.

“The next day, the four brothers went into the woods and they did not come back. Neither did the daughter of the butcher emerge from her imprisonment in the apothecary’s workshop. The butcher went into a deep sadness at the loss of all his children. In a haze of grief, his knife slipped while he was carving venison, and he bled out and died. His daughter did not appear at his funeral, and people whispered that perhaps she was dead too. All the while, the apothecary smiled and assisted his customers, and spoke warmly of the wife he had upstairs. They were approaching their one year anniversary.

“Then one day, four wolves walked out of the woods and into the village. Their eyes were yellow and their bodies gigantic—five times the size of any other wolf the people had seen. The wolves headed straight for the apothecary’s shop. They broke down his door and shattered his potions. They climbed upstairs and emerged with the butcher’s daughter, who was alive and well enough. Holding her lightly in their jaws, they left the village and disappeared into the woods.”

It was not the story Gran told. And yet, it was. It told of the first time the wolves came to Big Village, and of the yellow-eyed apothecary who greeted them. But this version was entirely different from the one I’d grown up with. In Gran’s tale, the apothecary was the hero. He and his wife were in love. The river forgotten, I listened rapt as Timber’s precise voice altered the oldest story I knew.

“The apothecary called for a search party, but no matter how long they looked, they could find no trace of the giant beasts or the woman they’d

stolen. A year later, the wolves appeared again, this time taking a toddler—the young child of the butcher’s daughter, a blond beauty like her mother. The shepherd’s daughter disappeared too. She was once the sweetheart of the butcher’s youngest son.

“By this time, the people had forgotten how strange they found the apothecary when he arrived. They put out of their minds the uncomfortable rumors about his wedding, and they remembered only the ailments he’d cured for them. They didn’t even notice anymore how his eyes were yellow and his teeth pointed. He was a doting father, devastated by loss. When he called for a wall to be built to protect the village, the people rallied behind him. They did not want their daughters stolen too, after all.

“But when the apothecary married again, the wolves jumped the wall and stole his wife away in broad daylight. The villagers raised the wall higher, and they mounted iron thorns on the outside to pierce any wolf that charged it.

“The apothecary married a third time, and again the wolves came, and again the villagers improved their wall.

“But no matter how high and sharp the defenses, they could never keep every girl contained. The untamed and the curious still snuck through the gate in search of adventure. Off the path they’d go to pick a flower, and they would never return. And so the villagers posted guards on the gate. They sent their Huntsmen out to track the wolves who they imagined stalked just out of sight.

“As for the four brothers, I think you know what became of them. Transformed by the apothecary’s magic, they became the first wolves. Each night they reverted to human form under the light of the moon, though the touch of magic left them with the yellow eyes and pointed features of the man who cursed them.

“You asked the first night we met why we do not transform into wolves under the moon, and now you know the answer. To allow us to spend our days in our true human form would have been too kind.

“But the brothers adapted. They made new lives for themselves in the woods. They rescued their sister, who started this town. Her daughter and the other women targeted by the apothecary joined her.

“The sweetheart of the youngest brother was overjoyed to see him again; they promptly married. The other brothers mated with those reckless and curious girls who wandered outside the wall, and the sons born of these

unions were dual-form like their fathers. In time, those sons forgot they once came from the village. They grew to hate the villagers and the spiked iron wall erected to keep them out.

“Ah, but the youngest brother would not let his sons forget, and so he told them this story. And his son told the story, and on and on until one morning two hundred years later, a father cuddled his pups and told them they had once been men. He told them of the apothecary and his evil magics, and of the butcher’s daughter and what happened to her. He told his sons they’d been given the gifts of power and freedom, which they ought to use for good, as the brothers had together long ago.

“And what of the apothecary? Oh, they say, unable to keep a wife, he one day left the village. And nobody knows what happened to him.”

Timber fell silent. The woods around us were lightening, and my mind burst with so many questions that I wished to battle the sun to stop it rising.

“But—that’s a different version! My Gran, she told me that story a thousand times. The tale of the yellow-eyed man who first fought the wolves. It was her favorite. But it was nothing like that!”

“Which do you think is true?”

I raised my eyebrows. I’d never thought about whether Gran’s tale was true. It was history and it was fiction. Wasn’t that the case for all such tales?

“What makes you think either of them is?”

“Because one of them is.” He spoke with utter confidence.

“The one you just told?”

Timber looked at me steadily. “Decide for yourself.”

The sun rose and I watched him change. Could the truest, oldest story Gran told me be wrong? Was I prepared to believe a story in which the wolves weren’t villains, but heroes?

It was time to cross the river.

19

TIMBER SAT AND waited like a tame dog. He seemed to sense the moments when my fear screamed loudest with its shrill whistle, and he did not wish to make it worse by moving. His calm eyes watched from his frozen body, like he possessed all the patience in the world.

But I did not want to wait. I did not wish to take deep breaths and summon my courage and get centered, or whatever. I wanted to just go, get it over with, step into the water before I lost my nerve.

I strode forward, my chin high. I dragged Flora by her reins, though she saw the violent water and she bucked. Timber had said I should let her cross on her own, but I was not willing to let her get washed away.

“Just let go of her, Red,” he’d said. “If she starts to get carried downriver, do not go with her. Without you on her back, she’ll swim her way to shore.”

I wrapped the reins more tightly around my fist instead, and pretended Flora had nothing to worry about.

I reached the edge of the quick-flowing river and Timber was there before me like a lightning flash. I stumbled back. My heart was beating so fast, it made my hands shake. Flora’s reins were wrapped so tightly that my fingers were white and red.

Timber shook his head. He walked down the bank to a large stone with a pockmarked surface that resembled a human face. He looked back at me, and waited.

What did he want? I wished I could understand him.

Frustrated, I fixed on his eyes, the one part of him that stayed the same when he changed. They were always so expressive, I sought answers in their subtle shifts.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked.

Get in here.

Well, okay. I charged.

The water was frigid in the autumn morning. Even colder than it was that day...

No!

I shook my head to banish the thought. Behind me, Timber stepped into place. I shuddered at the first touch of his furry chest against my back. I'd not been this close to his wolf-form before, except for the last time we were in a river...

Timber guided us with his body. With one arm I held Flora, and the other, I snaked around his front leg. I stood beneath him, his body like a cloak draped about my shoulders, and I could feel his slightest movement. He nudged us slightly right, then slightly left, keeping us on the invisible path only he knew.

Flora huffed and struggled. She was not used to the water. She was not used to walking skin-to-skin with a wolf. I gripped her reins tightly as my fingertips began to prick, and then deaden. My feet were going numb too, from the cold of the water. I stumbled on the loose rocks of the bottom, and felt Timber's muscles clench up tight and then relax. I resolved to be more careful with my steps.

The current was strong, as Timber had anticipated, but he blocked it with his body. I was like a little doll cradled in his arms. I shook my head to lose that visual, although it was better than thinking about how it would feel if I slipped and went under. The cold would close over my head and the current would twist me until I did not know which way to swim for breath. Perhaps the creature behind me would once again hold me under with his teeth until I could not help but swallow the cold water. Perhaps Flora, in her panic, would trample me and break all my limbs and then the wolf would let go, and I would drift down the river like a piece of driftwood.

I shuddered and shook my head once more. Numbness crept up my body and we were not halfway across the river. The water had grown deeper and deeper. The rushing waves punched my jaw on their way across us and I tried to breathe evenly. To keep hold of Flora in my buried, unfeeling hand. To feel the subtle guidance of Timber's muscles behind me. And also to concentrate on where my feet stepped so that I would not go under. The challenge narrowed the world. Focus eclipsed fear.

Until Timber lowered his head to gently bite into the leather collar of my jacket. He lifted it up, and in my mind I knew he was holding onto me

the way I was holding onto Flora. But the front of his teeth scraped the bare skin of my neck, and goose pimples rose on my skin at the lingering touch of his cold, wet fur. I watched the puff of his breath as it came over my shoulder to mingle with mine. And I totally lost my focus.

I stumbled, and then slipped. I felt Timber's knee bend as I slammed into it, and then the current caught my legs, and twisted them, and my head went under. Blinding white light took over my vision. Inside my mind I could hear myself screaming, but nothing came out but bubbles. My brain exploded from lack of oxygen...or maybe just from fear. I slashed the water with my numb limbs, trying to swim. But on every side, I only punched at skin and fur. Flora and Timber—together they boxed me in. My feet reached down for slippery stone but found only water—I'd fallen off the path.

Desperate, I let go of Flora's reins.

Then something pulled tight against the front of my neck and choked me. My hands flew to my throat to battle the heavy, wet thing strangling me. *I'm choking. Choking as well as drowning. How many ways are there to run out of air?*

It was my jacket, I realized. And then I was rising. My face crowned the surface of the water and I took a gigantic breath. And then another. I coughed. Behind me, Timber's limbs smashed into mine as we both tread water. He held me afloat by my jacket collar. His teeth had never let go. Flora swam nearby, her eyes wild. Abandoning us, she headed for shore.

The water was deep. Above my head. I held my chin high to keep it out of the waves and I looked around. I searched for the stone that marked our entry point, but could no longer see it.

Timber let go of my coat. He swam so I could see him. I read his mind through his eyes. They spoke to me with silent words.

We fell off the path.

"Can we get back to it?"

No. We have to swim.

He must see the fear in my eyes. I felt it like a searing poker in my heart. But I had resolved to be strong today, and I clung to my resolve like a life raft. I heard my rattled voice tell him: "I can be strong enough. Do what you need to do."

Timber came alongside me, swimming against the current. I treading water while the muscularity of his wolf-form conquered nature. Then he

took a breath and went under, and I watched the choppy surface where he disappeared, waiting.

My next kick found soft flesh. Then, pressure against my stomach. Sharp points, closing around me on both sides. Timber had me in his jaws. He could pull me under or lift me up. I could not swim, I could not kick.

Do what you need to do.

I relaxed into the pressure of his fangs. Instead of fighting him, I chose to hang like willing prey inside his jaws. Thin tendrils of blood twirled in the water as the points of his teeth prickled my skin. Then Timber lifted his head and I came up with him. I shivered as cold air blasted my skin like the first moments of being born.

He swam for shore.

I could feel the huffing and puffing of Timber's heavy exhales. With each jerking kick, we rose in the water and then dipped again. Every drop I felt afraid. My hand grasped his shoulder and I clung to him. Beneath my grip, his tired muscles shook. Yet he kicked, over and over, with forceful determination. And I realized that Timber would die before he would let me die. He would give every bit of strength he had to keep us afloat.

Suddenly it seemed silly to be afraid of the frothing river water. Timber held me, so I was safe. Why had I ever stumbled back from these jaws, which cradled my body so gently?

Without thinking, I reached into the water. My fingertips caressed his skin. They searched his stomach for that little patch of white fur.

Timber's swimming faltered, and his eyes found my face and devoured the sight of me. Inside them, hope exploded with dazzling brightness before shadow descended to smother it. A universe roared into being, only to extinguish like a fledgling flame. Emotions fought wars, and lost or won. I could not read the message.

Our eyes locked, we reached the other side of the river. Gently, Timber lowered me into the shallow water and released his teeth. I stood up and droplets fell from me like rain. I stretched out, feeling prickling heat sweep my body from fingers to toes. And the whole time, I never took my eyes off Timber. He never took his eyes off me.

Without really realizing what I was doing, I took a step towards him. He walked backward, deeper into the violent river.

"No!" I startled us both with my forcefulness. Timber froze, his grey fur plastered to his back.

I stepped forward again. The water flowed over my shins but I looked up, up, up at his dripping face. I lifted my tired palms and placed them on either side of his snout. I stood with my head thrown back, red hair a messy mass of knots, plastered to my neck and face. A picture of prey asking to be eaten.

But it was not a monster that stood above me. It was Timber, who I trusted. I closed my eyes.

I felt his head descend. My fingers still tangled in his whiskers. A tongue lapped gently at my cheek. I opened my eyes and his were right in front of me, consuming half my face with their gaze. I laughed. I hugged him. Fell into him more like, my arms flying out and holding on. His whole body was shaking in exhaustion and cold. His fur was as matted as my hair, and his chest heaved heavy with his breaths.

I backed away as abruptly as I leaned in, and the glimpse I caught of his eyes was still of war, of wariness and confusion and doubt and hope. I smiled, enjoying my first moment of being the strong one. My eyes were clear. They were the eyes of a girl who was wildly alive, and unharmed, and no longer afraid.

20

AFTER WE CAME out of the river, I felt no desire to go further. The trees were thin here, and shafts of bright sunlight poured through to create patches of yellow-white light on the grass.

“I don’t want to go on,” I told Timber.

I struggled to peel the sleeve of my jacket off my arm. It was soaked again. Good thing we brought the wax.

I took off the shirt I’d taken from Timber’s chest and I hung it to dry from a tree branch. Then I sat down to attack my boots, those thick and heavy, glued-on things. My cold fingers felt swollen as they battled the wet laces, sensation stabbing as it returned. Eventually I wriggled out of the boots and set them in the sun. Timber watched this, occasionally giving a shake. Already his fur was rising back into its normal position on his body. Already Flora, who beat us across the river, rested in the pleasantness of the sun. But humans are not so simple, and I still had my pants to get off.

My clammy wet skin clung to the rigid leather. I huffed and rolled and pressed until reluctantly, the pants began to separate from my skin. I wrestled to take them below my knees.

The wolf did not know where to look. He did not, I sensed, want to be so awkward as to turn around, but he did not wish to stare either. Stiff-backed, he sat facing me, his chin held high, his eyes looking sideways. The overall pose was so formal, I giggled as I finally conquered my leathers and freed myself.

I should turn them right side out and lay them to dry, but the struggle I’d just undergone to remove them had made us enemies. I discarded them to stiffen up and dry as they would.

I abandoned myself to the little girl in me. I collapsed backwards on the green grass and spread my arms out wide around me. The fog of the morning had given way to a blinding, cloudless sky. I moved one arm to

shade my eyes as I lifted my head to study the surface of the river, which glinted as if littered with shards of metal. Its endless chugging burble filled my ears. The soft water jumped like a lively child against the mossy edges of flat stones.

Behind the river, the trees showed the riotous color of their dying leaves. The blinding sparkle of the sun carved its pathways to the ground through the oak and maple and birch.

“There’s nothing of this inside,” I told my wolf.

Of what?

I stared at a yellow-orange leaf as it twisted its leisurely way down. A small fuzzy animal busied itself at the base of the tree. The river flowed on as it had long before I was born. Were there fish beneath its surface? Of course there were. The leaf fell on the surface of the water and was instantly swept up in the current. It joined a mass of others that were caught in a trap made of rocks and driftwood. A bird landed on the driftwood and sang.

“Of life.”

I lay in the sun for hours. Soft hairs frizzed and curled around my face. At every silent suggestion in Timber’s eyes that we go on, I shook my head belligerently and burrowed myself pleasantly again in the grass. It was the first time in the Woods that I felt free and happy and safe, and I refused to give it up until absolutely required.

We were nearing sundown when Timber yelped. I sat up sharply and reached for the axe I’d discarded on the forest rug, but he was only telling me that he’d finally had enough. I sighed.

“Fine.” I scratched the new sunburn on my freckled skin.

My pants were a mass of hardened leather, crumpled and inside out. I tried not to see Timber’s eyes saying *I would’ve told you so*. I rolled them as best I could into a tight ball and stuffed them into the pack on Flora’s side. It was a town full of women, right? I didn’t need pants.

I felt brazen and large as the sun. I felt as though there was not a single challenge I could not conquer. I laced my boots up over bare skin, and when I saw the angry red scars left by Luthor, I smiled. I lifted my undershirt to inspect the tiny pinpricks from today’s journey across the river. Marks of courage and survival and strength, all of them. Daily reminders of what I’d gone through—what I *could* go through and live. Thrive, even. I could not be prouder to wear the marks.

Did Gran feel the same about the scar that crossed her face? I'd seen her stare sourly at it in the mirror, but then her face softened and she smiled, as if some good memory had overtaken the bad. At the thought of Gran, I felt a pang of longing. I desperately hoped she was okay.

I donned Timber's shirt, which was long enough to be a very short dress. I thought probably it looked roguish with my tall boots and bare legs. I strapped my axe over the stiff leather of Gran's coat. I fed Flora a snack and bemoaned the knots in her mane. Finally ready, I gestured into the Woods with my hand, an invitation for Timber to lead on.

I followed my wolf, and the strange and wonderful new feeling of being powerful did not leak away. Instead, it settled down inside me like an animal making a nest in which to sleep. The sun was a slice of blazing fruit, sharp and orange. It took my breath away.

Tiny brambles scratched lightly at my bare legs and I marched on, ignoring them. When the first night bird hooted, I smiled.

The character of the forest became strange and secretive. The ground before us dropped away into a crater of collapsed dirt and fallen limbs. Timber turned to avoid it but a thicket of thorny bushes soon appeared to surround us. The only path led back to the river. Still Timber seemed to know the way. He pointed out a low bush and I coaxed Flora into jumping it. He brushed aside a low pine branch to reveal a new path, narrow and uninviting.

"They built their own Wall of Thorns," I mused.

I wondered which came first. According to Timber's tale, the apothecary's first wife began the town after her rescue from Big Village. As I remembered this, I realized that I accepted Timber's tale as truth.

That night when Timber became a man again, I told him.

"I've decided your story is true." I was looking away as he dressed. When he finished I turned back to find the man Timber staring at me. His yellow eyes devoured my bare legs, and I felt grateful he didn't show such hunger as a wolf. Even with my newfound daring, I might have feared being eaten.

"I can't believe you did not put on your pants."

"So what? It's a town of all *women*."

His jaw worked and he shook his head. Suddenly I felt unsure.

"Isn't it?"

He turned away to walk on. Soon it would be dark enough to need a torch.

“Are we almost there?”

“We would be there already if we’d started out sooner. We lost time when we got carried downstream. Not to mention the rest of the day.”

I smiled ruefully and shrugged. I skipped to catch up to him. When possible, I was stretching my legs tonight, offering Flora a needed break. “So did you hear me? I’ve decided your story is the true one.”

“Have you?”

“Yes.”

“You’re right.”

“I know. But how do *you* know? Where did you hear it? It’s different than they teach in the village.”

“My father taught me. You asked once what family I come from. My ancestor was the youngest brother, who made sure his sons would not forget.”

I cast my mind back to the tale. “His sons told the story, and their sons, and on and on until it got to your dad.”

Timber nodded. “My father carried on the tradition, as would I, if I had pups.”

Tradition. Tradition. Memories scratched at the front of my mind.

“The Alpha—you kept reminding him of tradition. And he said he was honoring tradition in demanding me as a sacrifice. Is this story where your traditions come from?”

“In a manner of speaking. The story is true, so it is not the story that began the traditions, but the actions of the four brothers that created the traditions and the story both.”

“The tradition of taking girls from the village.”

“Yes. Especially anyone with the blood of the sorcerer. But to rescue them, not harm them. That is a fundamental part of the purpose of the capture. Some of the pack would rather forget that.”

My mind was connecting dots, finally seeing behind the curtain. “Rommel is from the line of one of the other brothers, right? One of those who forgot the story, forgot they used to be human?”

Timber nodded.

“What about the Alpha?”

“Ah. Erik’s father was Alpha before him. He was not a great thinker. He didn’t teach his pups to wonder what makes man different from beast, or to question what the sorcerer truly did when he changed us. But as leader of the packs, he did teach his sons to respect our culture, our traditions. Erik feels a responsibility to uphold the old ways, and an entitlement to the village’s women and those of the sorcerer’s blood.”

“Which you used to convince him to send me here.”

Timber nodded. “Rommel wishes to move the packs away from the old ways. All he remembers of the old story is that the village cursed us and cast us out. All he sees is the Wall of Thorns.” He hesitated.

“What? What is it?”

“Rommel wants war, Red. All-out war between the pack and the village, as sometimes was suffered in the old days. He convinced the Alpha to launch that attack at the new moon, and he was livid when the Alpha surrendered in exchange for you. He will keep working for war, and he may get it.”

I shook my head. “Gran’s never wanted that. She will try to prevent it.”

“Your Gran may not be in charge anymore. And even if she is, she is not the peacemaker you imagine. It was in her time as Supreme General that the village violated the treaty that kept relations peaceful for six decades.”

“What—what do you mean? Violated what peace treaty?” There was no mention of a treaty in any of the books I’d ever read. How could they leave something that big out of our written history? But then, so many of our records had been destroyed during past incursions. Suddenly I wondered if that too was a lie.

Timber shook his head. “Sometimes I forget how little you know.”

I felt the sharp sting of hurt, then scolded myself for the feeling. What did I think? That a single moment of looking into each other’s eyes at the river would change everything between us? That he wouldn’t be harsh with me anymore? Timber was a wolf, and his roughness was part of who he was. I shouldn’t be so naive.

I walked on and said nothing, trying not to be sullen. Until an important question occurred to me, and it burst from me before I asked myself if I could bear another of his gruff refusals to answer.

“So what do you think the sorcerer did to the brothers when he changed them? You said your father talked to you about the nature of humanity. What does it mean to you to be a man and a wolf together?”

Timber was silent, but not because he did not wish to answer. He searched for precisely the right answer. “For the others, it means shame. Shame in one form about the other. They fear the half of themselves they cannot understand. Which form they fear is personal. Sampson sees himself as a man, cursed. Rommel embraces his animalism; he and his pack have become hardly human at all. The Alpha is harder to understand, though I believe he’d choose his humanity if given a choice.”

I waited, but no more was forthcoming. “And you?”

My wolf stopped walking and stilled, an outline in the dark. “Red, I am not ashamed of what I am. I am not afraid of my nature in the darkness or the light.”

21

A HOWL. CLOSE, so close. I drew my axe in a heartbeat. My eyes scanned high for pinpricks of yellow light. Wasn't Grandmother's House supposed to be free from wolves? A safe haven from the pack?

Perhaps the Alpha's spies followed us across the river. But Timber stood beside me as a man. With the moon high and bright, they should be men too. I looked to Timber in confusion and flexed my hand on my axe handle.

"Hold, Red," he said. He did not reach for his own axe. Instead, he held his hands up in a signal of peace.

The wolf that walked out from between the trees was small. Little bigger than a dog, in fact, and my axe automatically lowered. The wolf snarled at Timber and I raised it back up. Beside the wolf, another appeared, and another. Another. Flora pawed the ground and pulled at the reins in my hand. I held her tight as ever. "Shh, shh," I said. It was when we were surrounded just like this that she'd bolted and left me alone.

Nearly a dozen small wolves now, and still Timber held his hands up and did not reach for his axe.

"This is Red," he said conversationally, addressing the first to appear. The wolf still snarled unpleasantly at him, but had not moved closer. "I believe you were seeking her some time ago. I've brought her on orders from the Alpha to take up her rightful place as a member of your sisterhood."

It was a formal speech and I wondered if the words were a ritual of some kind. On hearing them, the wolf stopped snarling. Her shoulders rolled as she prowled slowly towards me, eying my axe the whole time.

"Red, put down your axe."

"Fat chance."

"Put down your axe." His voice was firm and it drew my eyes to him. I let the axe lower to my side. Timber nodded. "She won't hurt you."

The wolf was almost on me. It was the strangest sensation to look down at her...and something else was strange too. What was it?

The wolf sniffed me. She looked sidelong at one of her companions, who came forward to sniff me too. They circled me, sniffing deeply in uncomfortable places, until I shifted on my feet. "Alright, I think that's enough." I wanted to shove them off me like misbehaving puppies. I pulled at my shirt and wished I'd worn pants.

I told you so, Timber said with his eyes, and I glared back and couldn't help but smile a little. And just like that, the wolves retreated. Slinking back into shadows and silence, they were gone; so gone, I wondered if I'd imagined them.

"Um, what just happened?"

"We were cleared to enter. Come on."

Timber strode forward. But it seemed to me, running to catch up, that there was a tightness about his shoulders now that had not been there before. I wondered if he was as pleased to arrive as I'd expected.

Yet it did not seem to me that we'd arrived anywhere. Still we followed a narrow path as it curved through the straight trunks of tightly packed trees.

"These trees are perfectly spaced. Were they deliberately planted this way?"

"Good girl. Yes, the pattern makes it hard for the body of a large wolf to pass quickly."

We walked on. Perpetually I scanned the woods, looking for the eyes I felt sure watched us.

"You said we were cleared to enter, but I am seeing nothing." Yet as I said this, a wide dirt road appeared ahead, bisecting our path. Standing as guards along this boundary were more small wolves.

A guarded circular road. Just like in Big Village.

Timber approached and the closest wolf barked to greet us. "Timber and Red," he said. I kept my axe in my hand as this wolf circled like the others had done. When she sat down once more, Timber turned onto the wide road and walked at a brisk pace.

Small wolves stood guard at regular intervals. Narrow paths branched off the larger road, but Timber marched past all of them. When I peered down these trails, I saw cottages nestled between the trees. Shadowed in

darkness, the lights turned out and the fires low, I couldn't see well enough to assuage my curiosity. Timber's pace made me run after him.

Eventually he turned onto a narrow road and my heart beat fast as we entered the village proper. Beside us on both sides, buildings stood proud in the moonlight. One was nearly consumed by vines. The next repelled the wild viciously to protect flowers that hung in boxes on each sill. Certain buildings suggested industry, reminding me of the creaking signs that hung above shop doors in Big Village. In a way it was like home. Was this what Big Village was like before they built the wall?

We came to a large circle of flat stones. At the center, a well. Benches in various states of decay peppered the space, but no people sat on them. Trees were cleared here, pressed back to the edges of the stone where I could see dozens of small paths branching off in as many directions. Already, the town was larger than I expected.

Flora's iron shoes echoed hollowly in the empty air as we walked towards the well. Timber walked slowly, his eyes scanning. Nobody was around, and few lights glowed in the closest cottages.

"They're all asleep," I muttered. It was strange to think of sleeping at night after weeks of the opposite.

Just as we reached the well, a cottage door burst open. A woman rushed out holding a torch.

Timber turned in her direction and waited, placing his hands behind his back. When she stopped a few feet ahead of us, he bowed his head in respect.

That alone made me look sharply at this woman who had run to greet us. The small wolf who trotted out of the cottage behind her and stood at her side just increased my interest, and when she reached out her hand to scratch between its ears, I thought I might burn up with curiosity. I studied the wolf, who closed her eyes in pleasure at the touch. They opened again and an electric shock raced through me.

Blue eyes. That was the strangeness. I searched my memory of the evening. Blue eyes, green eyes, grey eyes. Not one of these small wolves had yellow eyes.

Having figured this out, my gaze shifted to the woman. She was older, with grey and white hair frizzing its way out of a bun she'd wrapped at the back of her neck. Her eyebrows were sharp and dark over brown eyes, and there was nothing pointed about her ears. I could not see her teeth, for she

did not smile at us. She kept her austere face expressionless, and under her homespun dress I could see the well-muscled form of a woman who labored with her body each day.

“Greetings, Timber. Good to see you again,” she said, though it did not sound like she meant it. “And who is this?”

“This is Red. I deliver her, and protect her, on orders from the Alpha.”

That earned a sharp look from both the woman and I. He’d protected me before we ever even met the Alpha, hadn’t he? So had Timber just lied? True or not, hearing him speak as if I were nothing but duty for him soured my mood.

Timber, I wanted to say, weren’t you just protecting me because you wanted to?

I’d never say it to him, of course. How could I? And it occurred to me suddenly that I had emotions I needed to keep in check. Entirely inappropriate emotions that had risen up out of the river water like a sprite come to life in the moment I’d touched my palms to his face.

The woman, who I assumed was the leader here, looked me up and down. “Glad to see he honored the old way. Given her heritage, we weren’t sure he would.”

Timber said nothing. And I decided I was tired of being talked about. I shifted my axe to my left hand and held out my right. “Nice to meet you. I didn’t catch your name.”

The woman looked amused, but not displeased. She took my hand with a firm grip and shook it.

“I’m Rosa. This is Sarah.” She indicated the wolf at her side. “We’re head elders here.

Tomorrow, I can set you up with an orientation. For now, we need to get you a cabin, settle you in for the night.” Rosa turned to gaze around, as if jogging her memory as to which cottages had beds available.

At the thought of sleep, I let out a gigantic yawn.

“She can stay with me,” Timber offered.

His words made the leader look back at us sharply. No, at me sharply. Did she purse her lips and look disapproving? Did she search my face for signs of fear or pleasure? I’m not sure what she saw there, except blankness and tiredness.

“That’s fine,” Rosa said, in a careful toneless voice. She pointed at a barn beside her own cottage. “You can bed your horse down there for

tonight.”

Timber nodded, and then gave another, deeper nod. A sort of bow.

“You’ll find yourself most welcome here. We’ll speak tomorrow.”

Those words were for me, and then the woman and her wolf turned as if to leave.

“Wait,” I said. “I have a friend who I think might be here. She was taken during the attack at the new moon. Her name is Marta. Pretty, with brown wavy hair.”

Rosa’s sharp face considered. “There were many new arrivals after the incursion in Big Village. I’m afraid I don’t know all of their names. During your orientation, you might ask around near their cottages. In the daylight.”

I tried to bury my disappointment. “Thank you.”

She turned to go again, then once again turned back. She studied my face in the dim light. “I met her once, you know.”

“Marta?”

“No. Your Gran.”

The empty town around me came alive in my imagination. Had Gran sat on one of these benches when her hair was still red like mine?

“I was young too, then, of course. Not yet in charge. But even as inexperienced as I was, I could tell right away what she was.”

“What was she?”

“She didn’t belong here. But I sense...” Rosa’s eyes roved up to my frizzing wild hair and down to my bare legs. “...I sense you’re not like her.”

“Excuse me,” I called as she turned away again. I felt strangely cold.
“What was she?”

Rosa actually smiled at my firmness. “She was a leader.”

Then Rosa and Sarah took themselves back into the cottage they’d come from, and Timber and I were left alone in the sleeping village.

“Come on,” Timber nudged me. “Bed down Flora and then you can sleep the night away.”

We headed towards the barn. From there, I followed him as he took a new branch of the road, which led us away from the village center.

“Why is it really called Grandmother’s House?” I asked. In my fiery heart, I wanted some kind of story about Gran’s time here. But of course, Timber did not oblige me.

“I told you the apothecary’s first wife founded the town. She raised her daughter here, and it was her grandchildren who eventually gave the place

its name.”

“Oh. So not about Gran at all.

On and on the road curved. The cottages grew sparse, and I began to wonder if we were leaving the village entirely.

“Where is this place?” I stifled a yawn, having missed my usual day’s sleep.

“Near the perimeter.”

“I’m surprised you have a place here. You don’t seem exactly... welcome.”

“It’s not mine. They keep a cottage for visiting wolves.”

“Seems like there’s a lot of wolves that aren’t just visiting. Small wolves with multi-colored eyes.”

Timber heard the unspoken question. “When cursed men have male children, they are dual-form like their fathers. But when they have daughters...”

The unfinished statement hung in the air, but I couldn’t understand. Every wolf I’d seen transform was a man. Even the children who ran around their mothers’ legs at the Alpha’s lair were boys. Ceylona said the girls came here. But if these small wolves were the girls, why weren’t they human right now?

“Yes?”

“The curse doesn’t touch women, Red. I don’t know why, except that the sorcerer wrote it for the brothers alone. So when we father girls, they are born as human or wolf. Ordinary wolves, the way wolves were before the sorcerer stole the form to make his monsters. They have no yellow eyes, no extraordinary size, and they don’t transform. Rosa and Sarah are sisters. Born from the same human mother, part of the same litter. Here, they can live together in peace, separate from their violent brothers.”

I opened my mouth and closed it. Sisters. Sisters who couldn’t speak to each other. “But that’s so sad!”

“Why? They’re not unhappy. They live here in harmony, protecting each other and the other women affected by the curse of the brothers.”

I believe you were seeking her some time ago, Timber had said to them.

“My first night in the Woods...these were the wolves that surrounded me, weren’t they? They spooked Flora.”

“Yes.”

“They were trying to rescue me but I went with Rommel instead. If I’d only gone with them, I would’ve come here and been safe. Nothing would have ever happened to me.”

“Yes.”

I laughed at the irony of my misfortune. Gran taught me never to trust wolves and all it had done was allow me to be tricked. Yet even at this thought, I could not feel angry. I could not wish I’d chosen differently that night. If I had, I would never have met Timber. I would never have become strong.

“I’m not sorry,” I said fiercely. “Not for myself.”

For those sisters, divided by their forms, I was sorry. Timber must have seen something in my expression when I turned to look at him, for his face took on a strange sad look of satisfaction.

“You’re ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“You’re ready to help me, Red. You’re finally ready.”

22

I PEPPERED TIMBER with questions. It felt like so long since I sat before him in his cave, weak with infection, and he told me he wanted my help. I'd nearly forgotten. He had not brought it up again, nor answered when I asked my questions. Now it seemed he'd been waiting until I was 'ready'...whatever that meant.

He did not answer now either. He only walked on silently until we once again reached the perimeter road.

"We're only back where we came in!" I said, outraged at the soreness of my feet and the heavy weight of my eyelids. But it was not true. Before us now, a cottage waited on the edge of the road. More rundown than most I'd seen tonight, with no carefully planted garden to bring it to life. Even the trees seemed to avoid the place. Nearby, the sharp green eyes of a sentry wolf watched our approach. She stood outside a guard station a stone's throw away. Lamplight leaked through the windows, and a human face watched us from inside. A large bell hung silent.

"So this is where the men stay." In the doorway, a flap of hanging canvas undulated in the wind. "It's welcoming."

"Rosa can provide better quarters tomorrow, if you wish."

I eyed the guard station. "Do *you* have to stay here?"

"I do."

I followed him through the canvas. The opening was over-wide, large enough to accommodate the body of a male wolf. I heard the catch of a match, and Timber was leaning over a lantern and lighting the oiled wick.

"But you're not one of the bad ones. You're not dangerous."

"I'm a wolf. I'm a man. They tolerate me like they tolerate the young men who come to woo a mate with silky words."

The wick caught fire and brightened the room. I looked around the cottage and smiled. An actual bed! I wanted to curl up on it and wiggle my

head deep into the pillow. A basin to hold fresh water. I could wash in the morning to help me wake. A small kitchen table and a few hanging pots completed the sparse decor. A thin layer of dust covered everything.

Timber went to the fireplace. A thrill rushed through me at the thought of once again being warm. My bare legs were chilled; I'd long ago begun to question the reckless thinking that had ascended with me out of that river, persuading me to leave off my pants. I laughed out loud, a nervous sound that made Timber look over at me, his yellow eyes frowning.

"I'm sorry. It's just that I'm so excited to sleep in a bed and be warm."

Timber said nothing, only stacked kindling. "I thought you might like it here," he said finally. "I imagine it's much like your village."

I couldn't deny it; the comparison had occurred to me too. Yet somehow I sensed that he meant this in a bad way. I felt tired at the thought of asking why. Couldn't we just cuddle by the crackling heat of the fire and smell the fresh river water on each other's skin?

Where had that thought come from?

Timber's fire caught and a tiny orange flame danced. He disappeared outside and returned with more wood.

"Let's get some sleep," he said. He snatched a blanket from the bed and dropped it on the floor. I saw he planned to curl up on the hardwood in front of the fire.

"No—"

His eyebrow raised. He waited for me to tell him what I protested against, but how could I?

No, I want you to sleep in the bed with me. I lost my courage. "No, I want you to tell me right now how I can help you. You keep putting me off and I'm done with it. You said I was ready, so tell me."

His eyes, for a second, were the tired eyes of an old man. I saw that a part of him did not want to tell me, did not want to initiate whatever process would begin to uncoil once I knew. He kicked his blanket away into the corner.

"Fine, Red. Fine." He turned from the fire he'd just built and he passed through the canvas into the dark.

"Damn," I muttered, rushing to my pack for the hardened mass of my pants. I forced them on and hurried after him.

We walked down the perimeter road. Darkened cottage after darkened cottage. I longed to explore, to throw open doors searching for Marta. *In the*

daylight, Rosa had said.

I prepared myself for another long walk, but it was only minutes later when Timber turned off the path. “Here,” he said, and I had to squint to see it.

The cottage took no space from the Woods in which to breathe. The cedar shingles of the sharply peaked roof drowned under moss. Vines consumed the walls and flowered where the gutters should be. Dim light flickered behind windows covered in black ash; branches scraped and scratched at the dirty glass. From out of the chimney, bubbles in fluorescent colors drifted skyward. Every story Gran ever told about witches in the woods rose to flood my memory.

“Timber, what is this place?” I whispered, fearing to be heard by whatever creature inhabited this cottage.

Timber did not answer me. Instead, he only ascended the front steps. Ferns crowded the rotted wood planks and he crushed them with his boots. The door was made of thick wood, but it was unlocked. I peered over his shoulder from the safety of the ground as he opened it. An oil lamp cast its flickering flame about the cottage, but no one was in the house.

Unperturbed, Timber jogged back down the stairs. Kicking at the overgrowth of ferns, he walked around back.

“This place is freaking me out,” I whispered as I stumbled after him. “I’ve listened to enough of Gran’s stories to know bubbles floating out of a chimney means bad news.”

“I thought I taught you something about believing those stories,” Timber said. He spoke in a normal voice, not hushed like mine. “I think it’s beautiful.”

I tried to see what he saw. The moonlight lighting up the soft moss. The forest hugging the little cottage as if cradling a baby.

Behind the cottage was a garden. Sharpened stakes tilted at wild angles, rope strung between them. I couldn’t recognize most of the plants. Was that a black mushroom? And that one—the poisoned berry bush Timber taught me not to pick from.

“Selma,” Timber said, and I saw a figure move. I started; I hadn’t seen her at first. She was bent down on her knees in the soil, digging with her fingertips. She wore a simple brown dress with a dirtied white apron, and her dark hair did not catch the light. She looked up at the sound of his voice

and smiled. It was the first smile to fall on us since our arrival, and I felt a strange relief.

The woman stood up and brushed her hands on her dress. She came forward, moving with a smooth, easy walk. “Timber? Am I seeing you?” She laughed, a throaty deep sound. Tight curls of black hair made a cloud around her head. She leaned over the low fence and gripped Timber by the shoulders. Enfolding him in a hug, she kissed him on each cheek.

Then she looked at me, appraised me up and down. “Who’s this?”

“This is Red, the beloved granddaughter of the Supreme General.”

Selma’s eyebrows rose. They were dark and thick, perfectly arched. Her face was classically beautiful, her brown skin flawless. “Really? How’d she end up so deep in the big bad Woods?”

“Colonel Leanna sacrificed her to the Alpha at the new moon. Gran was indisposed.”

“Dead?”

“Apparently not. Likely still very much alive, and recovered by now from her injuries.”

“Well enough to come and get her granddaughter?”

Timber nodded.

Selma’s eyes turned on me again. “And she’ll help us?”

“I believe she will.”

Selma burst into a huge smile. “So you saved her and brought her all the way here, just for me.” She giggled and hopped the low fence. She was quite tall, I noticed, now that she shared ground with us. She towered even above Timber, and yet her slim frame did not make for an intimidating presence. Selma threw her arms around Timber and squeezed him like a little brother.

I cleared my throat. I did not like being talked about any more than I liked the implication that Selma was Timber’s reason for protecting me. I squared my shoulders as they stood draped around each other. “Timber, maybe it’s time you finally told me what it is you think I’ll help you with.”

Selma’s mouth formed an ‘o’. She elbowed Timber playfully in the ribs. Then she laughed once more, an easy throaty sound. “Not much of a talker, is he?” She extracted herself from Timber and held out her hand to me instead. “Come inside and I’ll show you.”

Inside, the white walls danced with rainbow-colored light from vials of glowing potions. The precious glass containers lined every shelf, full with

liquids, powders and herbs. Thick sludge in a cast iron cauldron burped the bubbles emerging from the chimney. Dried herbs hanging from the rafters cast shadows.

“This won’t do,” Selma said, entering behind me. She reached into her apron pocket to retrieve some small bit of green. She tossed this at the meager light from the oil lamp. The lamp flared, burning suddenly brighter. I stared at the display. Was this magic?

Selma saw my awe. “So I’m thinking all this is new to you. Do you at least know the old tale?”

“Timber told it to me today. Or yesterday.”

“Good. So then you know that the brothers rescued their sister after she was taken by the sorcerer. She had her own kind of power. It’s probably what attracted the sorcerer to her in the first place. Not a magic like his, of course, but an ability to use natural things to defy the usual laws of men. Sometimes the women of her line still have this power. And I’m one of them.”

I studied her anew but there was nothing pointed in her ears, no yellow in her eyes. “You can do magic?”

She rocked her palm. “A little.”

“Yes,” Timber said. “She can do magic. And she thinks...” He stopped, prompting Selma to take over.

“I think I can reverse the sorcerer’s curse. It’s kind of my life’s mission, actually. But I need your help, Red.”

My mouth fell open. “No more wolves?”

Timber’s voice was quiet, sounding almost regretful. “No more wolves.”

“But what could I do to help?” I looked around the enchanted cottage, brainstorming nothing.

Selma’s eyes were lit with a fanatic’s excitement. “Let me show you.”

In the corner there was a small bed. Selma bent to retrieve a package from beneath it. She placed the cloth bundle on the mattress and unwrapped it. Inside was an ancient axe. The blade was orange with rust and chunks were missing from the wooden handle. Beside the axe, so small I almost missed it, was a carved wooden ring. Gingerly, I reached for it and picked it up. It was a beautiful mahogany, polished and smooth. I slipped it onto my ring finger and it fit perfectly.

“What are these?”

Selma touched the axe. "This axe belonged to the oldest brother. He was a woodcutter. The ring was carved by the youngest brother and given to his wife."

"Artifacts from a fairy tale," I mused. "Why do you have them?"

"Every wolf living carries the blood of these brothers in their veins. So I need an object from each brother to break the curse. Not just any object. Something meaningful to them. Something they put their blood into."

My hand lingered over the cloth. "Where are the other two?"

Selma fixed me with her gaze. "That's where you come in. I've searched the Woods for years, but the other two brothers seem to have left nothing behind here."

I was starting to put it together. "You think they might have left something behind in the village."

"Material possessions meant more when they were men. And there's something else I need. A magical object I believe the sorcerer used to cast his spell. There might be some remnant of it in his old workshop."

"That's just ruins now," I said, deep in memories of a two-story building in the old quarter. "I used to play there as a child. We all did. It's just broken glass and mice. I doubt there's anything of value left there."

Selma came forward and took my hands. She acted as if we'd known each other for years instead of minutes, and I found instantly that I liked her, and did not mind. "Magic has a way of showing up for those of us with the blood." Her eyes sought Timber, as if she wished to ask him some unknown silent question. He did not seem to answer, and she looked back at me once more. "Red please, will you look for me?"

It would mean returning home. A dream I'd almost given up on. "I would...but Selma, I'm out here with you. The Alpha would never allow me to go home again."

Selma's grin widened and she squeezed my hands. "That's why you're so special, Red. You're the granddaughter of Gran. If she finds out where you are, she'll come for you with every Huntsman she has left."

"She hasn't yet." I hated to say the words, but they needed to be said. "Gran was barely hanging on when I left. She could be dead."

"She's not dead," Timber said.

My heart fluttered and flew. "How do you know?"

"She's just not."

“But how do you know? Did someone tell you?” I thought of his friend Sampson’s report on our way to see the Alpha. Had Timber heard from him again?

Timber was shaking his head. “No.”

“But then, how do you know?!” I was bursting, almost stomping. The thought of seeing Gran alive and well had awakened a little girl full of hope.

“Red, have you ever heard the story of how your Gran got the scar on her cheek?”

“No.” I was reluctant to admit it. Gran told me bedtime stories nearly every day of my life, yet Timber seemed to know stories about her that I’d never even guessed at.

“It was before she joined the Huntsmen. She was a young woman, about your age. She was alone in the Woods and three wolves attacked her. She killed all three with a single axe and got only that scar on her face in exchange. Red, your Gran is fine. Every wolf knows she’s the strongest human we’ve ever met.”

I swelled with pride. “So, if that’s true...”

Timber’s voice was measured and steady. “I will confirm that Gran has the resources to retrieve you. While I do that, Selma will teach you what you need to know. Then we will leave. Travel back towards the gate, so that the Huntsmen who come for you do not find this place. Our travel will be dangerous. The closer we get, the more suspicious the Alpha’s spies will become. I will get a message to your Gran that you have been sighted, and she will come to get you.”

Selma spoke up. “You can search the ruins of the apothecary shop. You can search the village. And when you find the artifacts I need—which I know you will—you can figure out a way to get them to me.” She beamed, and then reached out to stir a vial of congealing liquid.

I looked past her to Timber. His eyes bored into me. Ever since I entered the Woods, I only wanted to go home. Now he was giving me a chance. I could find Selma’s artifacts and bring them back to her myself, or I could send them out another way, staying forever in Big Village once I returned. I could choose.

Would I choose to abandon the Woods, now that I had finally found the bravery and strength to survive here? Would I choose to leave Timber? I felt

strangely unsure. Did Timber know of my conflict? Did he know how I felt about him?

We looked across Selma's cottage at each other and said nothing.

23

TIMBER AND I returned in silence to the guarded cottage. We pulled aside the canvas and stepped inside. His fire was still alive. In the corner, the promise of a warm, soft bed beckoned. Would I have my old bed back soon?

Timber retrieved his blanket from the corner and placed it on the floor in the center of the room. He sat on the blanket and kicked off his shoes. I sat on the edge of the bed, watching him. It was well into the night now and I knew he would transform in his sleep.

Silently, I removed my shoes.

“Goodnight.” He lay down.

The new knowledge that I might soon leave him made me feel brazen and reckless, like I had nothing to lose.

“Why don’t you sleep here?”

A single yellow eye questioned me.

“Oh don’t act like it’s a big deal. We slept close every day of our travels, even when I—” I faltered to a stop.

“Even when you were afraid of me.”

I swallowed. “Yeah, so why not now? It’s silly for you to sleep on the floor when there’s this awesome bed.”

“I’ll let you enjoy it then.” He placed his head in the crook of his arm.

“Timber, I want—”

The questioning yellow eye again. He waited with a patience I utterly lacked.

“I—”

The river water dripping from my clothes and skin. The thrill of feeling brave, of achievement. The conviction that I could do anything, anything at all in the whole of the woods, and here I was afraid to tell him that I wanted him to come and sleep beside me.

“Just come and sleep up here, dammit.” It burst out of me with no grace and I frowned at the sound of the angry words.

Timber eyebrows were high enough to leave his face. Wordless, he rose from the floor and picked up his blanket.

Almost surprised it worked, I hurriedly shifted my body tight to the wall to make space for him. With deliberate motions, Timber laid the blanket down the length of the bed. He tucked the edges behind me, his hands brushing my thighs and arms. I smiled at the gentle touch and the feeling of safety as Timber climbed in beside me.

The only sound was the crackle of dry wood as the fire ate it up. Neither of us was brave enough to remove our clothes. But the bed was small; there was no choice but to turn into each other. My legs found his and we entwined. The pillow was a cloud of feather down.

“Mm.” I cuddled myself closer to him and I felt his arm snake under me and take me into his chest.

“Thanks,” I said, for lack of anything else to say.

Timber made a strange strangled noise in his throat.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes,” he said gruffly.

“What was that noise?” I wondered if I was taking up too much space, or had an elbow somewhere I shouldn’t.

“Nothing, Red. Just—”

I waited. He was so warm. The hardness of his muscles was so attractive, and I shifted a little to press tighter against him.

He growled. And for a moment he moved away, and then he moved back, pressing even tighter. His arm came around my waist and rested there, and my breathing quickened.

“Just you thanking me, for this. It’s—” He shook his head, moving the pillow.

“As opposed to all the other things I really should thank you for, you mean? I know I can be ungracious—”

“No.” Timber cut me off. “That’s not what I mean. I mean...” he sighed. “Well, what are you thanking me for, Red?”

I got the distinct feeling that he was not successfully voicing his thoughts right now. Like his question was a net, cast in hopes he’d catch the right words.

“I guess, for giving me what I wanted. For making me feel safe and warm. For letting me get close to you. All of the above.”

Timber was silent for a long time. Finally when he spoke, there was a quiver in his quiet voice. “You’re welcome.”

The tone, so unlike his usual gruffness, made me twist so that I could see his face. His eyes were soft and slightly wet. They held an openness I’d never seen, as if all his walls had fallen down. With a finger, he brushed a hair off my forehead.

Our lips were only inches away. In this moment, those inches felt like nothing, and I leaned forward and erased them. Gently, I pressed my lips against his.

It was a soft, sweet kiss. The pleasure of it spread like warmth through my body, leaving behind a subtle desire, along with a feeling of safety and rightness. I pulled away, and smiled at the surprise in Timber’s eyes.

“Goodnight,” I murmured.

He swallowed. “Goodnight,” he said, his voice gruff once more. His arms tightened around me, like he held on for dear life.

When I woke up, I was alone and the sun was bright. I came out of sleep lazy and slow, my body warm under blankets tucked tight. But my face was cold. I frowned and blinked open a single eye. In the hearth, the fire was reduced to embers, and a cold wind flapped the canvas of the door, letting in cruel air. On the floor before the hearth was Timber. His whiskers twitched and his chest rose and fell evenly.

I wondered when he’d left the bed. I imagined him, just before dawn, wrapping me up and then lying down alone on the floor so that he would not crush me when he changed. I smiled. The luxury of a warm night snuggled close to him had done wonders for my exhaustion. Suddenly I felt hungry, and full of energy for exploration. Quietly as I could, I pushed the blankets down and retrieved my shoes. Despite my effort to not wake him, Timber opened one eye to observe me. Without moving, he closed it again and fell back asleep.

I pulled back the canvas and I walked out into the brightness of the day. But where to go? Last night’s walking had turned me around; the town was a spider web of trails. I marched over to the guard station.

“Good morning,” I said to the woman inside. She glanced at the sun, high in an early afternoon sky. Standing guard with her was a small wolf

with grey eyes. She stared as if fixated at Timber's cottage. I got the distinct feeling the women here distrusted him, or perhaps all the cursed men. Being under guard like this felt unpleasantly like being home again.

"I'm looking for a friend of mine. She might've been brought here after the last attack on Big Village. Rosa told me last night I could get a guide or an orientation or something to help me find her, but I don't know the way back to Rosa's either."

The woman pointed. "Go that way down the perimeter road. Take your fifth right. It'll be wider than the other paths, more obvious. That will take you towards the village center."

"Thank you." I practically skipped down the dirt road.

The village was alive in the midday sun. Gone were the dark cottages, closed and unknown. Doors everywhere were thrown wide and small wolves walked in and out of the cottages at will.

A woman weeded her small garden. Behind her, a young girl tried to climb a tree. She was not tall enough to reach the first branch, and a wolf pup nudged her foot, offering a shoulder to stand on. Another pup ran around the tree, barking incessantly. The mother—for that is who she must be—scolded all three without looking up from her gardening.

Next door, a grown wolf bolted out of a cottage to chase after a toddling child who followed a squirrel.

Homes became businesses as I approached the village center. The open front of a blacksmith's shop spewed smoke and vapor as a woman in a helmet plunged steel into water. An artist sculpted pottery from a chair in the grass. Behind her, a large window displayed her wares.

The stone well came into view. A group of women congregated around it, laughing and balancing their buckets on the edge. One of them shouted something at the artist, who shouted back. A mother pushed through the crowd to fill her bucket quickly. Behind her, two girls and three wolves. The girls could've been twins. The wolves nipped at them and ran away; they all circled the mother like a cloud, playing their familiar game.

"Wow," I said under my breath. It was like the village and it was not. Everywhere there was open sky and laughter. No circular roads leading nowhere; no trucks carrying troops. Women and wolves lived in peace beside each other here.

"Red!"

I turned automatically towards the woman calling my name, expecting Selma, or perhaps Rosa. My mouth dropped open as I saw who rushed towards me with a huge smile on her face.

“Jenn?!”

My old drinking buddy from Big Village. I almost didn’t recognize her now. Gone were her leathers; she wore a blue homespun dress and a soft sweater. Her strip of hair fell flat and was longer than before, though the sides of her head were freshly shaved.

“Red!” she said again, and she attacked me in a hug with the forcefulness of the military officer she had been. I felt her strong shoulders squeezing tight, and then she let go and stepped back. Her smile had not faltered an inch, and I realized that’s what made her look so different. In Big Village she was so serious. Now she was brighter than the sun. “What are you doing here?! How did you get here?”

“Me? How did *you* get here? When?”

Her face temporarily became stoic, as if remembering the village brought her back to who she’d been there. “I went out to fight in the Woods during the attack and the wolves carried me off. They left me deep in the Woods, and I was lost. I tried to find my way home, but a group of smaller wolves surrounded me. I tried to fight them off, but there were so many. Then a woman appeared with them and explained that I would not be harmed. She brought me here, and I’ve been here ever since!” She smiled beatifically.

It was just like my first night in the Woods, minus the rescue. *If only I had known then!* I thought again. I could feel the tightness of the scars on my thigh, but still I could not regret where my naive choices led me. I would not change them for anything in the world.

“I just arrived last night.”

“Oh, you’ll love it, Red. I admit, at first, I wanted to go back.” Her voice grew quiet and she leaned in, as if she told a secret. “I felt like I *had* to go back, you know? To help protect everyone.”

I nodded. Big Village felt like the only place in the world, while you were in it. But every day I spent outside its prison wall showed me a vast and varied new world. I didn’t need Jenn to explain the battle that must’ve raged in her between obligation and freedom.

“But there’s people to protect here, too. I’d give you a tour, but I’m on my way to work. They’ve got me training their little ones.” I saw a wooden

axe swinging loosely from her belt.

“You like that? I wouldn’t have thought...”

She laughed. “I know, right?” She looked up at the trees. There was a strong wind today, and their leaves dropped faster than usual. They swirled around our feet and moved on. “I like everything about this place. It’s beautiful. Peaceful.”

“I never knew you felt that way about the Woods.”

“I didn’t before. When you’re carrying an axe and checking the shadows for enemies, it’s hard to see.”

I knew just what she was talking about. Out here, *life* pulsed in every tree and animal. Before, our minds were closed to it. But we weren’t the same people now. Jenn was no longer a warrior and I was no longer a sheltered girl.

“So, Red, how’d you end up here?”

I laughed. Jenn had managed to keep her story short, so I would too. “My Gran was injured in the attack. Colonel Leanna took over, and she traded me to the wolves in exchange for their retreat. They wanted me because I’m Gran’s granddaughter. It’s old trad—”

“Tradition. Right, I know. They explained when I got here. It’s why the wolves carried me off instead of hurting me too. But boy, I bet they really wanted you. Everybody knows the wolves despise Gran.”

“They did. I was supposed to go to the Alpha, but a few others got hold of me first. They were going to do bad things, but I got away and another wolf saved me. He talked the Alpha into sending me here.”

Jenn frowned. The more we spoke of wolves, the more her expressions transformed her into the old Jenn. “What do you mean, a wolf saved you? You mean one of the women?”

“No, a male wolf. His name’s Timber. He’s not with the packs, he’s not violent.” I found myself looking towards where he still slept in the cottage.

When I turned back to Jenn, she wasn’t smiling at all.

“He’s a good wolf, Jenn. He’s not like the others.”

“There are no good wolves. No good men, anyway.”

Her words turned me cold. I thought I’d rediscovered a friend. Now I knew I had not. Jenn could see the beauty in this place, but she still distrusted wolves as much as Gran or Rosa.

“Jenn, it’s great to see you again,” I said. I gave her another hug. It was a dismissal and she knew it.

“Come see us when you can, Red. We’re all over in the cottages by the orchard.”

My heart pounded. “All?”

“Well, I share with Marta. She was picked up by the same patrol that found me. And there’s Cassidy, and—”

She stopped naming villagers at the look on my face. “Oh, you didn’t see Marta yet, did you? I know you guys were close.”

I could barely speak. I wanted to scream and shout and dance, but I stood frozen as if I could not quite believe. “She’s here? She’s really here?”

“Yeah. She’s fine. Probably at work right now. There’s a care facility for elders. That way.” She pointed. “But like I said, I’ve got to go...”

I started running, following the path of Jenn’s finger. My eyes scanned every head for soft brown curls. Leaves swirled around my boots. Soon I would need new soles. How did you replace soles in the Woods?

A shriek behind me, high-pitched and familiar. Then a body slammed into me from behind, and arms came around my front. She was shaking me, screaming and shaking me, and the familiar feel of the hug told me who it was.

Heart pounding, I spun around to look at her face. To be sure.

Marta. It was her.

“Oh my god,” I said.

“Oh my god!” There were tears already falling fast onto her clean cheeks. Her hair was pulled back neatly, and she was dressed in a simple green dress. My eyes drank up every sign of her well-being.

“Are you okay? Are you okay?!?” I had her shoulders and I was shaking her and she was laughing.

“Red, Red!”

“Are you okay??!”

Now she was nodding. We hugged again, and her shoulder came away wet from the tears falling down my cheeks.

“Oh my god,” I said again. All around us, passing women smiled at our reunion. I was beginning to feel dizzy and weak from the ferocity of my reaction. “I just saw Jenn; she told me you were here. I was trying to find you!”

“I didn’t even know you were here!” It was almost an accusation.

“I just got here last night.”

“Okay, let’s sit down somewhere. You’re going to tell me everything.”

“I’m going to tell you?! You’ve got to tell me everything!”

Hers was a familiar story. Wolves took her from the hospital during the height of the attack. “Do you know they’re men at night?!” Along with a half dozen other girls, she was carried deep into the Woods and unceremoniously abandoned. Soon, a pack of small wolves surrounded them, and a woman emerged and told them they would be safe. The women brought them here, where they were welcomed into the community. She’d been here nearly the whole time I was in the Woods. I felt almost sick with relief that she was safe.

“But Red, tell me your story,” she said. I told her everything. Every little detail, leaving out nothing.

But okay, there were a few things I left out. I left out the moment when I tried to escape and Timber stopped me. I left out the feel of his snout beneath my fingers after he brought me safely across the river. I left out the tender way his fingers tucked me beneath the covers, and the softness of his lips as we kissed. I left out that he was dangerous and I left out that my feelings about him were too.

Yet she picked up on what I tried to hide. Her tone was prying and careful. “Sounds like this wolf is rough on you.”

“He is, sometimes. But—” How could I explain? “It’s like, he’s always there when I need him. He always keeps me safe. But that doesn’t mean he makes things easy for me. He expects me to be strong and brave, even when I’m terrified. I started trying to prove myself to him and I ended up proving myself to myself too.”

Carefulness had become suspicion on her face. “You almost sound like you admire him. Like you *care* about him.”

I looked away, towards the closest cottage. Through the window I saw a woman kneading dough. When I looked back at Marta, she was watching the woman too, melancholy in her eyes.

“You hate it here.” I said it quietly, aware of every ear that passed us.

She smiled sadly at me. “What you’ve described—coming to life in the Woods. I don’t feel it. I miss my parents and Dylan. I miss feeling safe beneath the wall. I miss home.”

I reached for her hand and squeezed. I had only told her what had happened, and not what might happen next.

“Listen, I need to go check on something. Where can I find you again?”

“I’m off today, so I’ll just be at my cottage.” She gave me directions to her home by the orchard.

“I’ll see you again soon,” I promised. Then I launched off the bench, following the trails back to Timber.

I found him awake inside the cottage, lying still by the ashes of the fire. I grabbed a piece of wood and threw it on, sending sparks flying up the chimney.

“They are serious about that guardhouse. There’s someone there all the time, plus at least two wolves within sight of this cottage.”

Timber nodded. It was probably why he was sitting indoors when it was a bright sunny day outside.

“Anyway, that’s not what I came back to tell you. What I came to tell you is...Marta is here! I actually found her, and she’s safe!” My grin split my face and my voice flew a mile a minute. “But she hates it here and she wants to go home. So I was thinking, when I go...”

He frowned, and shook his head. I felt shocked; I was sure he’d say yes.

“Why not?”

But his eyes could not give me the complex answer I required. I’d have to wait till night to find out why he refused.

24

TIMBER AND I spoke as soon as the sun went down.

The village had to believe I spent the last month a captive of the wolf pack, he said. When Gran found me locked up with a ruined jacket and angry pink scars, it would be an easy story to sell. But how would Marta explain her survival? She carried not a single scar, she'd lost not a single pound. Returning her risked revealing the secret of Grandmother's House to Huntsmen who did not know of it, and Timber would not forfeit the privacy the women here held so sacred. Not all Huntsmen were good men, he said. Not all Huntsmen could be trusted.

I sat on the bed and listened, arms crossed over my chest. "I hear what you're saying, but she's my best friend. I'm not going to just leave her here unhappy if we can help her."

"So you would put every child here at risk. You would put Selma's mission at risk. You would risk bringing violence here."

"Come on, okay? Now you're just being dramatic. You're imagining the worst case scenario instead of thinking of the possibilities. I mean, there have to be ways to mitigate the potential problems. We could come up with a story that wouldn't raise too much suspicion. Marta would never deliberately give this place away. Just tell her what to say."

"I will think about it," Timber said tightly.

For the next few days, we did not discuss it. Neither did he meet Marta, for he left his cottage only to visit Selma. Not once did he wander the town trails with me. Never did he emerge in his wolf form. The guards rotated shifts, keeping eyes always on the windblown canvas flap. Meanwhile I said nothing to Marta of Timber's plans to return me to Big Village, reluctant to raise or dash her hopes before anything was settled.

Every night Timber and I ate at Selma's. Her cooking was delicious, full of subtle marriages between the fresh herbs from her private garden. After

each meal we cleared the table and sat in the dim light of her bubbling potions until nearly dawn. In her sonorous voice, she taught me everything she knew about the brothers and the ancestral sorcerer who cursed them.

On the seventh night, a knock came on the door. Startled, I turned, but the night was too dark and the windows too ashy to peer out.

“Who is it?” Selma called.

“Your father.”

Timber nodded, satisfied. Apparently he expected this.

Selma opened the door, welcoming in Sampson.

“Cold one tonight,” he said, shuddering. He moved towards the fire, reaching out his hands. A woolen coat, damp with misting rain, protected his broad shoulders. Matching gloves covered his palms, but his thin fabric pants and shoes were wet from the river crossing.

“Hi,” I said.

“Red, good to see you again. Give me a hug, sweetheart.” That was to Selma, who had to bend over to hug the shorter man who was apparently her father. Had she grown up with him, or had their family split in half like all the rest here?

“You made good time,” Timber said.

“Considering I needed two nights at the wall after I got your note. The Huntsmen know we’re listening. Kept their mouths closed.”

“What did you learn?”

Sampson sat heavily in a chair by the fire. “Any dinner left?”

Selma went to the kitchen to retrieve tonight’s leftovers and a glass of water. She brought them to her father, who balanced them on his lap and ate neatly with his fingers.

“Increased patrols around the wall, but they’re staying tight, not venturing as deep into the Woods as they used to. They see a wolf, they kill on sight. I heard one night they killed one of their own men; he got separated from his team, and the patrol that found him didn’t recognize him. Thought he was one of us. Whoever is leading them has them all stoked up.”

“Gran?”

“No. Though she is back in fighting form. I saw her on a patrol. Only one good arm, but still enough balls to boss every man on the truck with her.”

“That’s my Gran,” I said, grinning. “What makes you think she’s not in charge?”

“She said, ‘We have our orders.’ Means someone besides her is giving orders now.”

“Who?”

“That, I couldn’t find out. But whoever it is is prepping for war, Tim. Big war. They wipe us out or we kill them all to stop them.”

“The pack’s reaction?”

“Responding in kind. Erik increased training and spends his time preparing battle plans. Rommel is his chief council. Seems the Alpha’s come to share his cousin’s thirst for blood.”

“Only because he thinks it’s the only way,” Timber said. He sat back in his chair, allowing the fire’s orange dancing flames to cast their calming spell. “The Woods are an engine overheated with steam. We need to move now if we’re to have any hope of acting before the explosion.” He returned his eyes to Sampson. “Thank you for this information. I know you put your life at risk to get it.”

Sampson said nothing to this, only tore the last pieces of chicken off the bone.

That night as Timber and I walked back to our cottage, the misty rain of the early evening turned to snow. Large clumps, heavy with moisture, hung on the branches above our heads, dropping irregularly to wet our hair. Animals cowered in their nests; the world was silent, changing color.

“Tomorrow I want you to invite Marta to dinner at Selma’s,” Timber said.

My mind burst with questions, like *why now?* But I only said, “Okay.”

The next night, I paced the small confines of Selma’s cottage as I waited for Marta to arrive. Timber watched me, leaning on the mantle. In the kitchen, Sampson questioned Selma in his low voice as he assisted her dinner preparations. Her answering commands were ever confident, never quiet. Slice those, dice those. A bit more pepper in this.

Marta’s knock was tentative. I tripped on the edge of the rug as I went to the door and threw it open. “Come on in!” My voice was over-cheerful, alerting me to how nervous I was for Marta and Timber to finally meet.

Marta smiled, shy and nervous herself, and held a carafe out before herself. “It’s only lemonade,” she said.

"That's great," Selma said, coming forward to take it from her. "I'm Selma. Welcome. I don't think we've met."

"I keep thinking that soon I will have met everyone and seen everything, but I only discover how big Grandmother's House is," Marta said.

Selma smiled. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Oh. Yes, thanks, I'll have a lemonade."

Selma poured the juice out into several glasses as Marta hovered near the door. Her large round eyes consumed the strangeness of the bubbling potions. "What, um, what are these?" She asked as Selma handed her a glass.

"Oh, they're my babies. Potions, rubs, various concoctions. Each to help me cast a spell."

"A spell? You're—"

"Think of me as your friendly neighborhood witch." Selma smiled and returned to correct her father in the kitchen.

"Let's not scare the girl as soon as she arrives," Timber said from his corner. Marta jumped; she hadn't seen him. He'd remained still, watching her. Now he launched off the wall and approached, holding out his large hand for her to shake. "A pleasure to meet you, Marta. I'm Timber. Red has told me so much about you."

Marta's eager, wary eyes betrayed her. She had so many questions. But she only took Timber's hand. "Yes, she's told me a lot about you too."

Timber smiled easily, as if he expected only good things to have reached her ears. "Shall we sit?" He indicated the table and Marta took the seat across from him. Now it was my turn to lean against the wall watching, for somehow I felt reluctant to join them there. But they talked only of silly small things, of the flowers in the Woods and the tangled paths of Grandmother's House, each getting the bearing of the other.

Dinner was polite and formal, a typical dinner of introductions with questions bandied about the table. It was not until Selma stood to clear the plates that Timber leaned forward towards Marta, his face suddenly serious. "I asked Red to invite you here tonight for a reason, Marta."

"Oh!" Marta glanced at me. "What's that?"

"Red tells me you would like to go home to Big Village. That you are unhappy here."

Marta glanced at Selma, afraid to have offended. But Selma seemed not even to be listening, humming to herself as she sprinkled white powder that I hoped was not magical over our dessert. “Yes, I—well, I don’t mean to be ungrateful. The women here have done so much for me. Saved my life, and it’s not a bad place.”

“But you would prefer to return home.”

She hesitated once more, guilty at her ingratitude, which she’d intended to share only with me. Her shoulders deflated as she sighed. “Yes, I’d like to go home.”

Timber sat back in his seat. His eyes found me, and I could not read the expression in them. “I think I have a way to help you with that.”

Marta’s mouth opened. She looked to me as well; I was a silent bridge between them.

“It is my intention to return Red to Big Village, though the pack will try to stop me once they sense our destination. I must get Red out of here, then send a message to her Gran, giving her Red’s location. She will come and get her granddaughter.

“Now, initially Marta, this was the entirety of my plan. However, Red informed me that you would like to return as well. Therefore, I now intend to send you ahead with Sampson. He will keep you safe and help you run into a patrol. The Huntsmen will bring you inside, and you will be the one to tell Gran where she can find Red.

“But Marta, this is a delicate business. It is imperative that Gran does not cast her eye towards Grandmother’s House. They cannot get pulled into the coming war; for the safety of all here, that is of the utmost importance. So we will give you a story to tell her about how you survived. We will give you a story about how you learned Red’s location. And you will need to be utterly convincing in sharing these. Do you think that’s something you can do?”

Marta’s mouth hung open, her bottom lip quivering. In fear, excitement, or surprise, I did not know. She turned to me, her eyes full of a single question: “*Really??*”

I nodded.

Marta swallowed, closed her mouth. She looked at Sampson with renewed interest. Not a witch and not my much-talked-about companion, she’d paid him little mind through dinner. Now he was her protector, should

she choose to return home. She studied his face as if she could learn if he was trustworthy.

Then, chin high, she turned her eyes back to Timber. “I’m a good actress, and I would never betray the trust of the people here. They saved my life, after all. Whatever you want me to tell Gran, I will. Just...I don’t know Sampson. I’ve heard about you. Red trusts you. Could you take me instead?”

Timber hesitated, and I froze. I’d begged for him to return Marta home, but it hadn’t occurred to me it might mean separating from him myself. Though we had not kissed again, we held each other in bed each night as we fell asleep. I tried to ignore the reluctance I felt to the whole plan when I considered that it would put us on opposite sides of an impenetrable wall.

To lose Timber sooner than planned...my spirit screamed its denial.

“I’m not going to do that,” Timber said softly, kindly.

I burned with relief even as I wondered why not. Did it disrupt his larger plan, or did he reject it for the same reason I did? The preciousness of those few days we had left.

“But I can swear to you that Sampson is as capable as I am. A good deal more capable at approaching patrols without discovery, in fact. I trust him with my life.”

“But if you’re just going to bring Red back to Big Village too, why don’t we all go together?” Marta asked.

“Red and I are high-priority targets to some members of the pack,” Timber answered. “Traveling with us would only put you and Sampson at more risk.”

Marta hesitated a moment longer. Her eyes sought mine once more. She nodded at what she saw. “Red trusts you, Timber. She swears you saved her life a half dozen times. I’ve never heard her speak of anyone the way she speaks of you. So I trust you too. Thank you.”

The rest of the night we discussed logistics. Around the table, the five of us crafted a story that would explain Marta’s survival. Timber made her tell over and over how she’d learned where I was.

“Describe the place again,” he said. “Again.”

In the end, he nodded, satisfied.

“You’ll leave at midday,” he told Marta. “You’d better go pack.”

25

I LEFT WITH Marta, to help her pack her things. The sun was high when we walked back to Selma's, where Sampson waited with a pack leaning against a black and white paw. Marta swallowed at the sight of him, and I felt her hand shake in mine.

"You can trust him," I said.

Marta laughed nervously. "Never thought I'd trust a wolf with my life."

"Yeah, I know, and thank you for doing it."

It was a strange thing to say, but I felt her leap of faith as a kind of acceptance.

"It's strange to say goodbye when I know I'll see you again so soon," she said, hugging me. And yet we both felt the vast dangerous Woods looming between this moment and that one. Everything had to go right before the gate creaked closed behind my back.

"Safe travels," I said. She hugged me once more, tightly, before I watched her walk away.

Soon we would follow. Timber said we should be three days behind them; he intended us to arrive at the meeting place just before Gran. But I was impatient to leave. I eagerly anticipated being alone with him again, building our nightly fire beside a stream. Though still ambivalent about the journey's end, I was eager for the journey's beginning.

That night as we lay in bed together, I whispered, "Tell me a story."

"Hmm." His hand trailed along my stomach, almost absentmindedly, and I shivered in pleasure. "How about I tell you about myself, instead?"

I tried not to let my voice betray my shock. "Okay."

"I was born right here, in Grandmother's House. My mother lived here, and my father was a member of the pack. They both wanted pups, but they didn't love each other. My two sisters were born as wolves, and my two brothers came back with me and my father to live with the pack."

My heart raced and I had to work to keep my body loose and relaxed. Was Timber seriously volunteering information about himself? I wanted to jump up and down.

“Is your mother still here? And your sisters?”

“She died years ago. My sisters are here. But I was never close with them.”

Of course not. Because the curse had segregated Timber’s family. He probably didn’t know them any better than he knew the guard who watched this cottage.

“My father was a good man. He told us stories. He taught us to speak, and even read. He taught us what kind of men to be. But my brothers never got the chance to grow up. They both died before we were thirteen. One was killed by Huntsmen. The other died of an infected wound he got in a brawl with another wolf.”

“I’m sorry.” I squeezed his hand. I knew loss too. When it happened to you as a child, you carried it with you forever.

“My father was angry after that. He didn’t handle it well. The wolf who’d brawled with my brother was Erik. It was a friendly fight. Just boys rough-housing. But my father challenged Erik’s father to a duel. Erik’s father was Alpha. He had no choice but to kill my father in the fight. After that, Sampson took me under his wing. Selma became a sort of sister to me. They’re the only family I’ve had for a long time.”

My thumb rubbed the side of his finger. He’d had a hard, sad life. But I think I’d always known that, even before he told me.

“Did you ever try to have a family of your own?” Of course what I really wanted to know was if he’d mated with any of the women I might see walking the trails here.

Timber shook his head on the pillow. “No. No, I was alone. And I thought it better to stay alone.”

“Why?”

He was silent a long time. His hand squeezed mine and he pulled me back tighter against him. “I’m not much like the rest of them,” he finally said. “Sometimes being with people who aren’t like you is more lonely than being alone.”

I twisted onto my back so that I could see him. Gently, I raised a hand to brush the side of his face. “I’m not like you at all,” I said, “but I don’t think you feel alone right now.”

His gaze burrowed into me as if he wished to bring forth my heart to see what was written on it. “I’m not so sure you’re not like me, daughter of the forest.” He leaned forward and kissed me, gentle like before. And although I wanted more, I was still too afraid to ask.

The next day I ventured into town, leaving Timber to rest before the fire’s ashes. With no Marta to meet, I walked towards Selma’s instead, and found her eating lunch at her table. A notebook rested beside her, recipes scrawled inside with smudged ink. I stood at the door, awkward and empty-handed, but she smiled at my arrival and stuffed the last forkfuls of salad into her mouth.

“Got nothing to do now, huh? That’s great, you can help me with my afternoon’s work.”

We walked into town together.

“Selma, what happens if I can’t find all the artifacts?”

“Then there’s war.” She said it tonelessly, as if it were a reality she’d considered so often that it no longer held emotional sway over her. Just the words clenched my stomach tight. I thought of people I’d known since birth lying in pools of red. I imagined myself walking down a street strewn with dead wolves, checking each one to see if it was Timber. Marta would have to flee back here to live a life of peace. That’s if she could make it here at all.

“I’ll find them.” I could hear the conviction in my voice, even though I had no way to know if it was even possible to do so.

At the edge of town, there was a large sprawling garden. This was where Selma took me to collect the ingredients for tonight’s dinner. “Just a cabbage today, I think,” Selma said to the woman behind the fence. She wore a long apron, streaked with dirt. “And some potatoes.”

The woman tossed these things to Selma. “I’ll trade you for some of that cream you know I like,” she said with a wink.

“That cream’s worth more than a cabbage. I’ll take the rest you owe on delivery.”

We left the garden and turned towards the orchard. Between the two sat a pasture where large animals grazed, ground birds darting between their feet. Goats hopped on rocks and munched on bushes. When we came to the orchard, we found the peach trees already bereft of leaves. Selma twisted an apple off its perch and held it out for me. “Salted meat with cabbage and

potatoes, with apple pie for dessert. Nothing better when the weather turns cold.”

“Enough for a pie will cost you, Selma,” a woman called to us from atop a ladder.

“I already have a vial with your name on it, Louise.”

“How did you learn to cook and make potions?” I asked Selma as we picked.

“My mother was an herbalist. When I was little, she taught me. But she couldn’t do magic, and I didn’t know I could either until I was eleven. Mother got sick during a terrible snowstorm. It was just me and her trapped in a cottage in the deep Woods.”

“Where was Sampson?”

“Oh, he didn’t live with us, of course. He lived with the pack, and my brothers. We’d actually traveled to the cottage to meet them. We used to go twice a year. But they were all sick too, and couldn’t come.”

“You have brothers?”

“Not anymore.” She smiled a sad smile and shrugged at the old ache of loss.

“I’m so sorry,” I murmured, remembering my parents. I knew that ache too. “So what happened with your mom?”

“Well, what could I do? I went out into the snow to harvest some kelp that I knew sometimes helped with fever. It was a shot in the dark, honestly. I was more likely to die than succeed. But the Woods helped me. It led me to a flower that I’d never seen before. And when I saw it, it just felt *right*. Like the answer. You ever feel anything like that?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Selma’s intense dark eyes bored into me. Then she shrugged. “Well I did then. I made a potion with the kelp and the flower’s sap and I fed it to my mother. She got better, and after that I knew that the magic in my ancestor’s blood was in me too.”

“Is all magic the same?” I asked because it seemed to me like the ability to use the gifts of the forest to save lives was not much like the ability to turn men into wolves.

“I don’t know,” Selma said slowly. “My magic—it’s more like drawing out the magic in my ingredients than it’s like casting spells. But they say the apothecary could cast a spell without any potion. They say he could just speak things and make them happen. They say that when he cursed the

brothers, he just stood there and talked to them, fingering the tooth of a wolf that he wore always around his neck.”

At the stone well she stopped to pass out vials and tins to the gossips there. Each of them promised a unique payment.

“You do good business,” I said.

“Only witch in town.”

Ahead of us I could see Rosa’s cottage. She was in her yard, chopping wood with her grey hair pulled tight into an unforgiving bun. Beside her, her sister wolf Sarah looked on, disinterested.

I wondered if anyone had noticed yet that Marta was gone. Would they think she ran away with some strapping young wolf who came to court a mate? They couldn’t possibly. They must know Timber was the only male wolf inside the perimeter road.

“Just one more errand to run, I promise, and then—” Selma stopped and cocked her head, listening.

“What is it?”

Selma shook her head, a quick sharp motion, silencing me. I watched the other women who wandered the town center. Did they sense what Selma did? At the well they talked on unperturbed, but across the way, Rosa’s wolf sister rose to her feet. Her ears were sharp and high, her body tight. She yipped to grab her sister’s attention, and Rosa stopped work immediately and listened. She adjusted her grip on the axe in her hand.

I reached behind my back for my own axe, which I still wore strapped over Gran’s coat every day. Guilt and regret flooded me—in these recent lazy days with Marta, I’d neglected to practice. I squinted into the closest trees, scanning for the familiar threat of high, bright eyes, but the sun’s rays were sharp and I saw nothing.

Around me, women were beginning to notice. One of them saw Rosa and nudged her closest companion. They froze as statues together. Their fear spread through the gathered crowd like a contagion.

The world was quiet. It waited on a precipice, time stretching out to make a single second feel like a lifetime. Only the heartbeat in my chest counted its true passage.

Then, barking. The barking of multiple wolves. I could not tell where it was coming from—from several directions at once, surrounding us. A bell began to ring, a bell like the one that hung on the guardhouse near Timber’s cottage. It rang over and over, insistent and echoing, a hammer smashing

against metal walls. Then the bell went silent, its last ring lingering in the air.

A dart of moving fur at the corner of my vision. I raised my axe and then lowered it again. A female wolf, running at top speed.

“Non-fighters, hide,” Rosa called. “The wolves have come.”

Women dropped their buckets and ran to the nearest cottages. Wood scraped as they barred their doors. The town center emptied; most of the women did not carry axes. I looked over at Selma, who stood frozen with her heavy bag pulling down her shoulder. She carried no weapon except a small knife in her apron pocket that she used for cutting vegetables.

“What do we do? Where do we go?” There was an edge to my voice. This was wrong, all wrong. This was supposed to be a safe space. In Big Village, I would have known what to do. There were clear procedures for these moments. And in the Woods, I’d always had Timber.

Timber.

“Timber. We have to get to him. He’ll protect us.” I made to run that way, but Selma’s hand raced out to close a tight grip on my arm.

“Unless he’s the one they’re after.”

“What?”

“Think about it, Red. He told me what he did, killing Luthor for you. They must want him bad, attacking him here. They haven’t breached the perimeter in forty years.”

That decided it. My legs moved before my mind made itself up. I had to get to him. I had to help him.

A woman, out of breath, blood on her axehead, burst from a path and into the village center. Rosa and her small band of fighters turned her way.

“Three of them,” I heard the woman say before she took up position in their ranks, her chest heaving. They stood shoulder to shoulder, facing out.

“You all know what to do,” Rosa said, but her face was pale.

I wove through the trees. Behind me, I heard Selma following, keeping pace easily with her long legs.

“Got any weapons in that bag?” I called back to her.

She shook her head.

All my thoughts were of Timber. I did not even check the trees for bodies and bright eyes. I only hurtled through them—towards or away from danger, I did not know.

Until there it was. The cottage. Its canvas door flap snapping in the wind, the guard station beside it abandoned. I tripped over something on the ground and fell hard on one shoulder. A small brown lump, fur sticky with blood. My eyes met Selma's and I swallowed. She helped lift me up.

“Come on,” I said quietly. The trees had ears. “He would be in there.”

We crept like secretive children towards the cottage. Axe ready, I lifted the canvas and looked inside.

Ashes smoldered in the fireplace. White powder and dancing orange embers. On the floor, a spreading pool of fresh blood. Sticking from it like porcupine needles, a few strands of light grey fur.

26

“HE’S GONE.”

TIMBER’S strands of fur claimed the pool of blood by the fire. I pictured him somewhere close, limping as he fled.

“We should go. They’re probably close. We—”

A growl, deep and ominous. I dropped the canvas and turned towards the sound. But I could not see the threat. He hid in the trees.

“Back to the well,” Selma whispered. “To Rosa and the guards.”

My eyes raked through the twisted low-hanging branches for any sign of our enemy. But the trees kept his secret in silence. No small animals scurried about their tasks. No birds sang overhead. I imagined running right alongside him and not knowing it. He would snatch us up and break our bodies before I could raise my axe. But there was no other choice.

“Okay. Go!”

At my word, Selma launched her body onto the path. Her heavy bag dropped off her shoulder and she hiked up her dress, leaping the body of the dead female wolf like a seasoned athlete. Head down, eyes forward.

I followed more slowly, awkward and disused to running. I wished for Flora’s strong body beneath me, but she could never pass swiftly through these cramped trees.

To my right, the sweeping sound of fur against bark. I twisted my neck but saw nothing. A few minutes later, the crack of a branch breaking behind me. The hidden enemy fell behind, hampered by the tightly planted trees.

“Keep going,” I called, but Selma was already far ahead of me. Too far for me to help when I saw it—a large mass of fur ready to collide with her from the left. “Watch out!” I screamed, and Selma turned her head and saw him. The wolf—his brown coat not familiar—launched his body towards her, gums pulled back, teeth wet.

Selma dodged, spinning herself behind a tree trunk. She weaved her way from tree to tree, heading off the path to where the forest was tightest. The brown wolf followed behind her, squeezing his body between the trunks, and I ran by, continuing down the path towards the well. Selma had already disappeared into the forest; I could not help her now.

Behind me, another branch rustled. Pine cones fell heavily on the ground. The other wolf was still coming. I tried to run faster.

Over the roots and through the Woods, I careened down the path towards protection. There it was just ahead—the break in the trees. Here was the cleared ground of the town center; there was the well. If Rosa and her squadron were no longer here, I would die as soon as I cleared the trees.

But there they were, a massive lump of fur fallen at their feet, their axes coated in blood.

“Here! Behind me, there’s one coming behind me!”

As one they came. I turned to stand with them and saw the wolf that chased me. Yellow fur, but it wasn’t Rommel. Another cousin, perhaps? He leaped at us from between the trees, letting out a roar of frustration and rage. The women spun about him in their simple dresses, proving that a lifetime of peace had not deprived them of skill at killing. The wolf could not fight them all; axe after axe split his skin, tore chunks from his body, until he slumped and fell, eyes closing.

“Two down,” one of the women muttered, wiping blood spatter from her face with her sleeve.

“Another one chased Selma.” I pointed. “That way, into the dense trees.”

“Let’s go,” Rosa said, and the women ran with their sisters towards the danger.

I stood alone in the empty village center. My legs burned and trembled; the scars on my thigh felt tight. Around me, every cottage was buttoned up, shutters closed and barred. I could do nothing more to help Selma than I’d already done, but what of Timber? I did not know where to start my search. With small steps I crept to the closest bench and lowered myself down. I just needed to catch my breath and then I would walk back towards his cottage, calling his name. I would pass the cottage and look for him along the perimeter road. Probably he’d fled to nurse his wounds. Probably he was okay somewhere.

Overhead the sun began its descent. This time of year, there was so little day. But it would still be an hour or two before it cleared the horizon, making way for the protective blanket of night. Weary but determined, I stood from the bench and ventured back towards the path.

“Timber,” I called. “Timber.” I scanned the ground for the shape of him.

Birds chirped once more, their voices querulous and hesitant. One landed on the shape of a small wolf who lay unmoving, and I went off the path to check on her. She was dead, her stomach ripped open by the three lines of a wolf’s sharp claws. Beside her, two more female wolves lay dead, and a human woman. I reached out a hand to close her eyes.

They lay in a sort of line through the trees, and without really thinking I broke off my path to follow that line. I took turns seemingly at random, following some voiceless instinct. No paths and no cottages; I might have been deep in the Woods again. Still no evidence of Timber anywhere, though I called his name.

Ahead, another body, this one a mountain of light grey fur. My heart racing, I ran forward to see its face.

“No, no, no.” I leaned my weight against the shape but I could not turn it over.

The patch of white fur! My fingers skimmed over the wolf’s stomach, but I could not find it. The body was lying at such a strange angle, perhaps I simply couldn’t see the spot.

A wolf stepped out to stand before the corpse. A gash across its black stomach dripped blood on the forest floor. He sat calmly on his hind legs. He seemed to smile.

I’d never seen him before...but those eyes. Beady and cruel—they looked familiar. Had I met him at the lair? Was he one of those who groped at my body, slurring insults and violent promises? No, no, I knew him better than that. The smell of rotted meat filled my nostrils as I realized how.

Luthor called him Jay. The short man with the tattooed arm and buzzed black hair.

Jay read the recognition in my eyes and smiled larger. His lips curled back from his yellowed teeth. He took a step towards the corpse, his massive paws imprinting the ground. I imagined our bodies colliding. Mine would go down like a doll with her strings cut.

I ran.

Trees whipped past. I took gaping, leaping steps, nearly falling forward, barely catching myself.

He would catch up fast. The trees were not tight here.

Ahead, the town center again. Rosa and the others were gone. Sent away by me. I looked behind me and there he was. Going into a crouch. As the trees broke, he jumped, arching through the air towards me like that picture I grew up with of a wolf overcoming the Wall of Thorns. Two decades of fearing the underbelly that approached me now. Out came his claws, slashing the air. He would cut me to ribbons before he even reached the ground.

My axe slipped in my sweaty palm. It dropped with a thump onto the ground, and I lay down with it, curling into a small ball, a tiny parcel, my hands behind my neck. The wolf passed over me and landed ahead. I could dart back into the trees but he would only catch me. I stood shakily to my feet, taking up my axe once more. Every breath felt sharp and short, a piece of glass blocking my airway. For a moment I did not even exist, I was only a space taken up by panic. I was a prisoner locked in a cabin, the smell of rotted meat in my nose.

Then, like a frost sweeping the ground, the fear in me grew cold. It crystallized and shattered, leaving behind only rage and strength.

A deep breath in my lungs and I began a scream. Axe above my head, I rushed the wolf, my eyes a fire of crazy. All lessons forgotten, I whipped my weapon before me like a torch. Jay took a tentative step back. In his surprise, he was too slow. Red droplets splattered as I carved a slippery path through his chest. But the wound was not deep enough.

The wolf jumped forward, jaws snapping. Spit frothed on his lips, and he whipped his head as if he already had me locked inside his jaws.

Behind me, another growl. A shock ran through me. I was so focused on Jay, I'd not even heard the approach of another wolf at my back. But perhaps it was a female, come to my rescue. I whipped about to see.

A blur of grey fur. An iron ball of pure force racing, running, and I smiled and got out of the way.

Timber collided with Jay. He bit down as soon as he hit skin. I heard Jay yelp and saw the splatter of blood. Now Timber shook his head, ripping out the throat. It was Jay who collapsed like a discarded doll, and Timber turned to look at me, red soaking his snout and running down his front.

There was that white patch standing out like a promise. Ears thrown back, Timber howled at the sky.

27

I WATCHED AS if in a daze. Perhaps a dream. The sun slanted sharply in the sky, descending to press us into darkness. Ahead of me my wolf stood with his paws in the blood he'd drawn. It seeped out of our fallen enemy to coat the ground like paint on the village square. Drips of it hung from his snout, and his tongue snaked out to lick them gone.

Here was a predator. Big teeth and bunched muscles and sharp claws. Once I would've been so afraid. Now I smiled.

With blood seeping towards my leather-soled boots, I remembered the other times he'd saved me. Saved me from drowning and torture and rape and murder. From infection and starvation. Yet it was not his protection I'd mourned when I knelt before the corpse I thought was him.

I stepped into the pool of flowing blood and raised up my hands. He issued a warning growl but I ignored it. I placed my hands on him and caressed the sides of his snout.

"I'm so glad you're not dead." It was an understatement, but I could not be eloquent in my relief.

His head lowered, his body relaxing into my touch. With tenderness, I leaned forward and kissed his unbloodied cheek. I put my hands around his back and pressed myself against him in a deep hug.

When I backed away, his eyes were orbs of shock in his face. Never had he thought that I, Red, could care for him enough to love him even as a wolf.

But I did. And I wanted more. Damn the sun, for I wanted more than this.

Inside me, the inhibition I'd clutched like an old doll with a porcelain face fell off a shelf and shattered. There we were back on the edge of that river with his furry face in the palms of my hands. The world once again

was exhilaration and beauty. Cuddling him was not enough. My desires had crystallized and I understood them now with sharp precision.

But I remembered too that we were not the only inhabitants of the world.

“One of the wolves chased Selma. It was awhile ago. I don’t know what happened.”

Only inches from my face, his lips pulled back to show his teeth. Blood still lingered in the corners of his mouth, and an ominous vibration sounded from deep in his gut.

In my stomach, a strange warm sensation fluttered, and spread as tingling. His ferociousness, once so terrifying, was now my favorite thing.

“She ran that way.” I pointed. Timber ran and I followed him as quickly as I could.

“Another one! There’s another one coming—east, east!”

It was Rosa’s voice. I called loudly in answer. “It’s Timber and Red! We’re on your side! Don’t attack!” We slowed in our approach, inching forward until we saw them.

Rosa and her team surrounding the fallen body of a male wolf. Selma sat on the ground beside Sarah, who issued a high-pitched whine of pain. One leg displayed the white of shattered bone; Selma was trying to set it, her face ashen.

I ran to her. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. I scanned her body for injuries, but she seemed to have only acquired a few scrapes.

Rosa spit on the corpse. “Are there more?” she asked Timber.

He nodded. I felt cold, ice water in my veins.

“Spread out. Canvas the town!” Rosa looked up at the rapidly falling sun. “They’ll be easier to find before they turn. Go quickly.”

The women scattered, jogging away in pairs. Rosa turned back to Timber.

“Has the Alpha gone mad? He broke *forty years* of peace.” Her gaze fell on the corpse of her enemy and she snarled, looking like she wished to kill him again.

Timber could not answer.

When Sarah’s leg was set, Rosa gently lifted her and carried her towards their home.

"I need to get back to my place," Selma said. "That's where the other injured will go."

"Do you want us to come? I could help..." I trailed off. Marta was really the person for that job.

Selma shook her head. "No, that's okay. I have someone else who helps me. She's a little more, ah, experienced."

I tried not to feel so relieved.

Timber and I walked Selma home, and then continued on until we reached our cottage. His nose sniffed the air the whole time. At the canvas flap, he looked at me, and I understood what he wished to say as I always seemed to, as if his yellow eyes spoke to me in silent entreaty.

I'm going to join the search, to make sure they're gone. Stay here.

In the cottage, I washed the blood off my hands. I made a fire in the hearth even though it was not very cold. I scrubbed my bloody boots, and then started on the floor. I wished for a mirror as I smoothed down my frizzing hair, and changed into fresh clothes.

As soon as it was dark, the canvas pulled back and Timber walked in. He was naked and the blood was almost like clothes on him, dark patterns decorating his skin. Caked and dry, it flaked around his chest hair.

I had laid his clothes out for him with a basin of warm water. As he cleaned, I watched him. No averting my eyes, no privacy offered. I drank in the sight of his scarred, muscled body as he splashed water down his chest. The pink droplets rolled down his skin to pool on the wooden floor.

Between his legs, his manhood hung in a snarling mass of dark hair. There was a fresh gash across his hip and the water made it bleed. He hissed through his teeth and reached for a cloth at the end of the bed.

He saw me staring, and he froze, half-bent with his arm outstretched. His face was stone, and his chest rose and fell rapidly.

There was no denying that I wanted him. Not anymore. For so long I'd clung to my terror of his wolf-form, perhaps to protect myself from the other, even scarier feeling that consumed me now.

"What are you doing?" he asked quietly. His hand snaked slowly out until it grabbed the cloth. Then he snatched it back towards his waist, where he pressed it against the cut on his hip and blocked some of my view.

Never once had he seemed to care about being naked in front of me. But now I'd made him uncomfortable. For a moment, I almost felt ashamed.

But I banished the feeling before it took hold. I was tired of wanting him and finding reasons to feel sorry for it.

“I’m watching you,” I said, my voice only mildly shaky. “Would you like me to stop?”

Timber stared at me a moment and then, saying nothing, he returned to the basin and continued what he was doing. He held the cloth in place with one hand and splashed his face with the other. The water in the basin was pink and the floor was splattered and he was dripping.

Tension grew between us in the silent room. One-handed, Timber splashed and rubbed at himself until the basin was empty and his skin was fresh and cleansed.

He was trying not to look at me, though I had not looked away. He reached for the towel I’d set out for him and dried himself, holding the other cloth in place until he was ready to wrap the towel around his waist.

I sighed. Soon he would get dressed.

“Were any wolves still here?” I asked him.

“No. I saw Rommel during the fighting, but his body isn’t here, and I couldn’t sniff out anyone left on this side of the perimeter road. It seems he retreated.”

“That black wolf you killed was the other man who tried to rape me. Luthor called him Jay.”

His face became ugly, a silent snarl.

“Selma said the wolves haven’t attacked here in forty years. Why would the Alpha order this?”

“I’m not convinced he did.” He reached for his shirt and I resisted the urge to snatch it from his hands. The pulsing heat in my core argued that this conversation could wait until tomorrow. And yet he still would not look at me, and I wondered if I were the only one of us who felt this way.

“What do you mean?”

“Rommel has wanted us dead for weeks, wanted it badly enough to risk angering the sisterhood. The Alpha’s guards left us at the river. Rommel must’ve considered us unprotected.”

I shook my head, wishing I did not believe it, even though I did. If it was true, I was partially responsible for all this death. I shuddered, thinking of Sarah’s jutting bone. Of the woman whose eyes I’d closed.

Timber misunderstood the cause of my shaking. “Don’t worry, Red. Rommel’s crew took a hit today. There’s little time for them to try again.

Soon you'll be home in the village, safe behind the wall.”

“What if I don't want to go hide behind the wall?” I felt brazen as a pot on fire. I was trying to tell him, but I did not know if he understood.

“Don't tease me, Red. I'm not in the mood.”

His sharp tone was a jab I felt in my chest, but I stepped closer. “No, I'm not teasing. Timber, I—” But I didn't know how to say it directly.

I looked into his eyes with silent entreaty.

Remember our kisses. I kissed you. I stepped into the blood and out of the river. I'm not afraid of you anymore. I'm not afraid of my feelings for you anymore. I'm not afraid.

He sensed what was in my mind, like always. His face slackened. But still he did not speak or move towards me.

“Timber, I— I want you.”

His face transformed into the hungry, devouring expression of a predator on the hunt. He growled from deep in his chest and leaned forward, as if he might pounce.

“Am I the only one?” I whispered.

He stepped towards me as if he could not help himself. He was crumbling before me, some resolve, some inhibition falling away even as he tried to cling to it.

“Red.” His voice was scratchy and rough. It was full of longing and contained passion and tenderness.

My body was shaking. The tips of my breasts tingled.

“Timber.”

He growled again. He took a step forward and the towel fell from his waist. My breath caught as we made it to each other, and our arms wrapped us up tight. Our faces were close, but still we held back. Our breath played in the inches between us, and then we moved as one to the bed.

We sat facing each other. Our knees almost touched. A curl of his dark hair fell across his eye, and I brushed it away. If I could just be brave enough, it's the least of what I would do to him. My wolf.

He'd shown me his world and taught me to survive it. But more than that, he'd shown me a new woman inside myself; one who was brave and capable. I loved him more for this than for all the dangers he'd saved me from.

My fingertips settled on his rough jawline, and he twitched. Almost pulled away, a lifetime habit. But his eyes locked on mine and he leaned

forward instead. I held his jaw in my fingers and I rubbed it gently.

A low growl of pleasure escaped his throat and I felt it vibrate down my hands and arms and into my chest. And then lower, lower, until it lit me on fire inside with want. His jaw clenched and unclenched; he was still resisting. Still holding himself back so as not to hurt or frighten me. So as not to be that big bad dangerous wolf.

“I’m not afraid of you anymore,” I whispered. “Don’t be afraid of me either.”

His whole body was tight. My fingers migrated up to play along the edge of his ear. They trickled down to tease the hairs on the back of his neck. With each of my movements, his body grew stiffer and his breathing heavier.

“I’m not afraid,” he growled. But every resisting movement proved him wrong.

I leaned in closer. I let our knees touch, and I pressed my lips to his neck. “Don’t be afraid of *you* either,” I whispered.

This time he did jerk back, and his desperate eyes searched my face. It was as if he looked for some sign of doubt, for the slightest hint that I would one day regret this. But there was nothing for him to find. My eyes were clear and open. I was ready. I was not afraid.

“Devour me,” I whispered.

My fingers found his lips. With a strangled sound of desire, he took them into his mouth. I gasped as his sharp canines pricked them. His tongue licked and teased and he sucked them like candy. He groaned, closing his eyes. His shoulders relaxed, and the tension drained out of him.

Then his hand came around the back of my neck, and his lips were on mine. Not slow, not lovely. He crushed my face with his want, and I met him with my own. We kissed like we were starving for it, our lips in a dance, our tongues darting.

His hands circled my waist and pulled me onto his lap. I followed his pull like a leaf caught in a strong wind. I was flying. His hands slipped under my shirt and I shivered at the touch of his cool fingers on my skin. He lifted my shirt over my head. It caught on my ponytail and pulled my hair loose. It fell in a loose halo around my face and I laughed. My hands met his as we freed the shirt and tossed it away. I smoothed back my hair as our eyes met. His were filled with a mirth and ease I’d never seen in him before.

I was still way too dressed, but leather pants could not be so easily tugged off.

I stood up. His eyes fed their hunger as he watched me, his penetrating gaze something I could feel deep in my gut. I unlaced my pants and slid my hands down my thighs to take them off.

His breathing quickened, and my hands quivered as I pulled off my tank top. I was nearly as naked as he was, now.

I returned to him on the bed, and he kissed me again, but this time it was tender. Gentle kisses on my lips, and down my neck, and then down further. He took my nipples into his mouth and worshiped them, first with tender kisses, and then with the slightest pinch of his teeth. I gasped, arching my back, and his hand went under me to support me even as his other massaged the breast his teeth teased.

I moaned, and the sound seemed to awaken the beast in him again. Urgently, he kissed down my stomach and pushed my legs apart. My heart raced and I was soaking wet, completely lost to anticipation and sensation. I spread my legs open for him, and he tore off my panties and tossed them aside.

I thought he would devour me there; his hands clenched around my thighs, and I felt the intensity of his desire. But he was gentle. He kissed and sucked and licked, chuckling in pleasure at each of my moans, and adjusting his approach as he learned what pleased me. My arousal rose, a light rain becoming a thunder and lightning storm. He licked me until my body thrummed and I was on the verge. Now his gentleness was not enough.

I growled, and pulled at him. I wanted his mouth back on mine, and he followed my lead eagerly. I could taste myself on his lips as I kissed him. I raked my nails across his back, making him growl and bite at my neck. I laughed, and tried to roll on top of him. But he would not allow this, and he pressed my hands down onto the bed, interlacing his fingers with mine and grinding his hips down to meet my rising ones.

He slowed to enter me. His eyes were so vulnerable as he watched my reaction, making sure I was okay. I was more than okay. I was lost in pleasure and sensation and passion. I had no thoughts but want. I wanted the weight of him on top of me. I wanted the fullness of him inside me.

He began to rock, and I rocked with him. Our movements were one. Our eyes were locked. Our fingers squeezed tight together. Then he leaned

his head down and kissed me once more, and the gentleness was not enough and I nipped his lip. He growled, and rocked faster. I moaned, and he released my hands. I brought them around his back and clung to him, my sweaty skin pressed tight to his.

“Yes, Timber, yes.” My voice was not my own. I was a desperate and needy creature. Hearing me spurned him on, and he increased his speed. I was close to my peak now. I floated amongst the clouds.

He slowed, teasing me. He smiled, mischievous, as he watched me writhe against him, wanting more.

“Devour me,” I begged again, and he obliged.

His head dipped to my neck, and he bit harder than before. I cried out as he pinched my nipple, and at the same time, began to thrust quickly. My nails dug into his skin as all the sensations mingled together: the sharpness of pain and the fullness of pleasure. I gave myself completely into them as I peaked, arching into him and moaning.

It was what he was waiting for. As soon as he felt it, he let himself go too, groaning as he shared the moment of pleasure with me.

Afterwards, we lay together, my head on his chest. His arms wrapped tight. We listened to the crackling fire as the sweat dried on our skin. Our breathing slowed, and I began to drift off to sleep.

He whispered something.

“Hmm?” I asked tiredly.

“I love you,” he whispered again, his voice rough.

The words traveled through me like an electric shock. But when my surprise settled, I felt strangely calm. Peace suffused me, and the world, off-kilter since the first step I’d taken into the Woods, felt just right. Nestled in his arms, I drifted off to sleep.

The night before we left Grandmother’s House, I woke up alone in the cottage. Darkness waited outside the flapping canvas, so why were my blankets thrown back? Why was Timber not in bed beside me?

I went to the door. Voices drifted in on a chill wind from outside. Timber and Selma, speaking in soft tones. I felt a strange instinct that I should not go outside and join them. Clutching my blanket around me, I hugged the wall, inching slowly over so that I could see through the crack at the edge of the canvas.

Tucked up against his body, their necks entwined, Selma whispered in Timber's ear. She waved her arms, her face alive. She gestured at the cottage and I darted back from the crack before I realized that the space was much too small for her to see through. I returned to my view as Timber shook his head. "No," his mouth formed. Over and over, "No."

No to what?

28

WE LEFT GRANDMOTHER'S House before dawn, saying no goodbyes. The clothes I'd come to love adorned my body: Timber's loose leather pants, Gran's jacket, my boots, and a fresh white shirt.

My hair was tied loosely back, and my axe was strapped on tight. I held Flora's reins lightly as we followed the path back to the river. We reached it just after dawn, and I crossed without hesitation.

On the other side, a tension in my shoulders eased. Each step pressed Timber's strange conversation with Selma further from my mind. By the time the sun fell I'd forgotten it, my uneasy curiosity overtaken by my eagerness for the upcoming evening.

I watched unabashedly as Timber changed. Now that I'd lost my shame at the sight of his nakedness, I found the process fascinated me. It was grotesque and it was beautiful, the way his ears and snout pulled inside his head. His whole body shrank down and his fur sloughed off, replaced by short curling hairs. His face emerged, the soft pink slit of his mouth already smiling.

I smiled back and then I laughed. All day I'd looked forward to this moment. Already I had made our fire, for I did not want him to get dressed. Already I had laid our blanket down, and we fell onto it together and made love. My back was blazing hot from the heat of the flames, and my hands were cold as they held his face in my hands. For hours we rolled together, exploring and whispering. The thin slit of the moon was high by the time we even considered sleep.

"I know we should sleep," I said. "Every night of the week will be like this—I need to get what rest I can."

Timber looked up at the moon. "Every night won't be like this."

"What do you mean?"

"For the next few nights, I won't change. I'll be a wolf all the time."

I made no sound, my heart beating fast and hard. “Why?” I managed.

“There’s no moon. We change to human form under the light of the moon.”

My eyes found the sliver in the sky. I remembered the last new moon. It was the night the wolf got into the village to take off Gran’s arm.

What had Victor said when he’d come to our cottage that night? Wolves were attacking his squadron, a dozen wolves at least. *But it’s night*, Gran had answered. It was the night of the new moon.

Not even Gran had known the secret Timber just told me.

Suddenly I felt furious. I sat up and grabbed at the corner of the blanket to cover myself. Timber raised an eyebrow and waited.

“Now you tell me?! There’s always just one more thing I don’t know, isn’t there? What about our last nights together?! We could’ve waited to travel. We could’ve—” I sputtered to a stop. We could not have waited to travel, nor would it have been safe to leave sooner. But still... “I wish I’d known,” I said quietly. “I thought we’d have night after night like this.”

Timber studied me with thoughtful eyes. He reached up to take hold of a curl hanging by my face. He twirled it absently around his big finger. “Red. I’m a wolf. You do understand that, don’t you?”

I blinked. “Of course.”

“This is the life of a wolf’s mate. Dealing with things like this. If you can’t handle it...” His words drifted off.

The vulnerability I saw in his face was heartbreaking. For perhaps the first time, I saw something fragile in him. At the same time, his words made me angry. Yet again he questioned my strength, and at this point, I resented it. “Come on, Timber. I thought you thought better of me than that. Do you really think I can’t handle what you are?”

His dark curls smacked his forehead as he shook his head. “I didn’t say that.”

“Sounded like it.”

For a few moments he said nothing. He looked so boyish lying naked in the dark, playing with a strand of my hair. “It’s not what I meant,” he said eventually.

“What did you mean then?”

The hair-twisting stopped. I watched as he retreated inside himself. It drew me closer. I let go of the blanket corner; my head found his shoulder. I nuzzled it as I waited for his explanation.

“I meant that you can’t count on breaking the spell to change things between us. I am what I am.”

“You don’t think Selma will break the spell?”

“Obviously I hope that she will. Many more lives than ours will be affected if she can. But you cannot choose to be with me because you’re counting on that to happen. You have to want me for me, as I am now, tonight.”

I stayed silent. Hadn’t I proved that I did? Yet here he was belaboring the point.

Do you think I don’t know you’re a wolf? That to love you means loving a wolf? It was exactly this knowledge that had fueled my anxieties since the day my feelings for him sparked to life. To think I wasn’t aware of it was absurd, and I could not understand what he was truly trying to say.

I said nothing for a long time, until my body was heavy with calm. I was dozing when he finally spoke.

“Let me tell you a story,” he whispered in his gruff voice.

I smiled at the familiar words. I snuggled closer inside his arms. Against my naked skin, the fur of his human chest tickled.

“Once upon a time, there was a wolf. He grew up happy, with brother pups and a father who loved him. He always loved the Woods that nurtured him like a mother. Then one day, he found himself alone. No family. No pack.

“For years, he lived alone. He spoke to wolves who looked like him; he befriended women who feared him. But he was apart.

“Always he remembered the lessons of his father: that each of us chooses who we are. Our form does not choose for us. Beast or man, a choice. Brave or fearful, a choice. The wolf felt pride in who he’d chosen to be, but still he was sad, for he had no one to share his life with.

“Then one day a girl came into the Woods. She was the daughter of his enemy, but her bright hair and her bright spirit captivated him, and he saved her life and took her to his lair. She could barely survive in the Woods. Raised in the light, she was terrified of the shadows, but he taught her. She proved herself brave and strong. And every day that she tried so hard to choose bravery, he loved her more. But this wolf, so used to being alone, said nothing.

“Then one day, he created an opportunity for her to leave him. There were many reasons. He needed her help to save his people and end a long

war. He wanted what was best for the girl; he wanted to give her back her warm bed and her family.”

He stopped speaking. He only held me.

One day, he created an opportunity for her to leave him. That day was today. It was my return to Gran.

“How does it end?” I whispered.

“I don’t know yet.”

For a time, we were silent. Only breathing. My mind whirled with his story. He still did not think that I would choose him. He did not think that, in the end, I knew how to love a wolf.

“You left a part out.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, part of the reason he helps her leave him.”

“What’s that?”

“Because he doesn’t know how not to be alone. Because even though he loves himself the way he is, he doesn’t expect anyone else to.” Against the side of my face, his jaw tightened. I felt his breath rise, his ribs lifting me high and letting me down.

“Is that so?”

“I think it’s so.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“So let me finish it.”

He took my arms in his big hands and lifted me on top of him so that we stared each other straight in the face. “Finish it Red.”

“She comes back. She comes back to him. And he’s not alone anymore.”

His eyes, always so expressive and secretive at once, betrayed him now. Hope, wild hope, and he let me see it. He let me see the depths of his feelings for me, the intensity of his fear that this night would be our last together. I saw the vulnerability he hid, the fear and loneliness he overcame, the love he felt.

“She comes back to him. The end.” I whispered it again and then I kissed him. Deeply, I pressed my lips into his. With every slow opening of my mouth, I asked for his desire.

“If it’s our last night for awhile, let’s make it count,” I whispered.

A growl deep in his chest vibrated down my body. He rolled me onto my back and pressed me hard against the scratchy blanket. I spread my legs

around his hips and I arched up into him. His palms were ships of exploration across my freckled skin. The cold wind made me shiver, my nipples pointed. They grazed his chest like the tip of a finger, and he growled again and warmed them with his tongue. Together we rolled in the forest, making love to each other, fighting time, fighting the sun. Fighting the world together, my wolf and me. Taking all the time we could until the sun came up and he gave me back.

29

GRAN WAS STANDING in the deep of the Woods, and I thought that I'd never seen anyone look so out of place before. In her only remaining hand she carried an axe; no longer was there a second one strapped to her back. She stood on the bed of her truck, high above the dirt and muck of the wild.

Around her on the ground lay the trunks of felled trees. The location Timber had chosen for my rescue was his own cave. I watched her from its hidden mouth. Determined to come in force, the Huntsmen had cleared a whole new road. At Gran's back were a half dozen trucks, each bed filled with soldiers and their shining axes. They scanned the forest with practiced eyes, but the cave was well-hidden.

In the nearby trees, my wolf waited. A single crackling leaf would send an axe into his heart before I could scream a warning.

It was time. I wore loose shackles around my hands and ankles; I'd rubbed my clean shirt with dirt. I raised myself to my feet and I let myself fall forward into view. As if I'd tried to run to her and fallen. From the ground, I waved my hands. The metal chain clanked.

“Gran! Grandma! Over here!”

The Huntsmen turned their faces from the Woods where Timber waited. With practiced swiftness, they launched from their wooden beds and came forward to sweep the cave behind me and usher me to Gran. Gran did not move, she did not smile. She closed her eyes to hide the wetness there. A shudder ran through her body and her shoulders drooped like a stiffness long carried was gone.

The Huntsmen fumbled with my chains, trying to take them off me.

“It doesn't matter; it doesn't matter. Bring her here!” Gran's suspicious eyes scanned the Woods. I was not safe until I was beside her on the truck. The Huntsmen half-dragged, half-carried me.

“Gran!” I looked up from where they deposited me.

“Now get those chains off her,” Gran said. “Where’s Sebby?” The boy came forward and picked the simple locks. The heavy weights fell from my skin and I stood, free. I climbed up into the truck and threw my arms around Gran’s solid frame. Her remaining arm came around me and hugged me tight. Her hand never released her axe.

I stood back and looked her over. Last time I saw her, she was unconscious and on the verge of death. The wrinkled skin of her face had looked fragile and pale, and her breathing was shallow.

Not so now. Consciousness had hardened her features, returning a look of determination that took ten years off her face, at least. She had good color in her cheeks from the cold of the winter air, and she stood solidly, her feet spread. The sleeve on her right side was rolled up and pinned just below the shoulder, so that I could see only her brown leather jacket, and nothing of the wound underneath.

“You’re alright,” I said. I did not need to fake my relief and joy.

“Of course I am,” Gran said gruffly. She was always gruff around her troops.

“And you came for me.”

“Of course I did. There wolves around?”

I cast my eyes into the trees, hoping to see nothing in the shadows. I thought of my wolf, watching just out of sight.

“No, nothing. Just squirrels and things.”

Gran continued to cast her eyes about. She wasn’t going to trust the word of an amateur who’d lived in the Woods only a month. To distract her, I threw my arms around her again.

“Thank you so much for coming for me!” I said, like the little girl she thought I was. Around us, Huntsmen donned condescending smiles.

“Get off, girl,” she said, patting my back.

“Nothing in the cave,” a Huntsman reported, vaulting back into the truck bed. “Though it looks like she’s been held there a long while.”

I suppressed a smile as I thought of the dirtied prison Timber and I staged. “I was,” I said.

Gran studied my jacket’s missing sleeve, wondering what happened to me. How well did Marta sell our story?

“Shall we do a deeper search of the area?” the man asked.

I shuddered, visibly and dramatically. I reached out to squeeze Gran's hand.

"No," she said. "We got what we came for. Let's go." At her word, steam rose from the engines and the convoy slowly turned itself around. We bounced over roots and around stumps, retracing the path back to the Wall of Thorns.

It's not the end, I thought. But in the next moment, I'm finally going home.

30

THE HEAVY WOODEN gate creaked as it opened. I stood with Gran in the bed of a truck, surrounded by a battery of bodyguards. The other trucks encircled ours like a barricade, each one piled high with Gran's militia. It was a parade procession, reentering Big Village in triumphant success. It was a military incursion force, ready to venture once more into the Woods to end their enemy for all time.

My mission was to prevent theirs. I must find the three artifacts Selma needed and bring them to her at Grandmother's House, deep in the western Woods.

The first part would not be easy. The ruins of the apothecary shop were unguarded, a place where children played with ghosts. But I might search freely for days and find nothing. Who was to say what ghosts left behind?

The latter part would be even harder. I must pass through the guarded gate to return to the Woods. I had yet to figure this part out, my brilliant plan a blank page.

Once in the Woods, I knew how to survive; my wolf had made sure of that. But how to avoid the Huntsmen who littered the Woods, the men Gran would send after me, and the pack who still hunted me? I could only hope Timber stayed close and found me quickly.

The gate yawned wide and the truck's engine puffed. We rolled slowly forward.

Here I was at the gate once more. Here I was at the iron thorns meant to kill the man I loved.

Here I was back in the village of my youth, and oh! there was the baker, waving. I waved back. The sun reflected brightly off the treeless expanse. Our truck turned and followed the path I once rode daily. From up on the bed, I could see the sweet shop where I bought my favorite treats. And there was The Rusty Axeman, and the school, and Flora's barn. Despite myself, I

smiled widely. My mouth stretched tight and my heart opened as I took in the familiar and comforting sights of home.

Gran was watching me. She smiled at my radiant face and brimming tears.

I was surprised at myself. How could I take such joy in this homecoming when my wolf waited and my mission beckoned? How could I feel such freedom now that I understood what a prison the wall had made of Big Village?

Yet there was the turn in the road that led to our home. I remembered the comfort and softness of my bed. I thought of wearing different clothes—the soft, womanly clothes I'd known before—and I nearly let my tears fall. I imagined a bath and I shuddered in near ecstasy.

Perhaps, I thought, I would not rush back into the Woods. Perhaps I might spend some time here, searching for the artifacts that would surely be hard to find. After all, it was natural that I so missed Gran, who was close to death when I left. I wished to feel her hold me; I wished to hear how she'd recovered and looked for me all this time. Perhaps she could tell me while I took a warm bath, and then she could tuck me into bed like I was a small girl again, and share her favorite bedtime story, which I now knew was not true. The story of the yellow-eyed sorcerer.

The crowds turned out for us, cheering and waving in the streets. I was a princess come home again out of the jaws of a monster. I waved and smiled at them in spite of myself. Our trucks took their time before docking, circling the village square three times so that all the villagers might see us and our success and triumph and lack of injury. My rescue was a win for Gran in an endless war and I played my part happily; I owed her that. My heart was full of joy and belonging and nostalgia and softness when we finally hissed to a stop outside the military compound. They opened the ramp at the end of the bed and indicated that we should descend.

Gran went first, striding out like a queen. I followed behind her, no less proud. Huntsmen and villagers clapped and whooped. I recognized many friends and I waved until my arm hurt.

A line of men waited to formally greet us. I thought this must be the last official thing I'd have to do before I could go home and have my bath. Gran stopped before them and bowed her head at the figure in the middle. It wasn't until then that I took notice. Who would Gran bow to?

On either side of the center man stood Huntsmen I recognized. Ranking officials in Gran's army; she wouldn't bow to them, they bowed to her. I looked sharply at the elderly man standing between them.

He wore a brightly colored, tailored suit. He looked older than Gran, perhaps much older, with deep ancient lines crossing a pale face. His eyebrows were pure white and pointed sharply at the ends, and his hair was white too, and fell softly around his pointed ears. His eyes were yellow, and when he smiled at my Gran, I saw a mouth full of pointed teeth.

The sun was high above me. It was day. The stranger was not a wolf. I knew who he was. I knew it in my blood and my bones. What I did not know was how it was possible that he was still alive. The hero from Gran's favorite bedtime story. The villain from the origin story of the wolves. This was the yellow-eyed apothecary.

My feet moved on their own. I stood beside Gran and I took her only hand.

She turned her smiling face on me. Now her expression looked like mine so recently had—alive with joy and lightness.

“Red! I’m honored to introduce you to an old friend of mine. This is Igor.”

The apothecary held out his hand. His silky smile framed his pointed teeth. “Red. A true pleasure to meet you. I’ve heard such wonderful things from your wondrous Gran.”

I did not take his hand. I couldn’t. I was frozen in my own confusion and betrayal. An enemy inside our village, and my Gran herself had let him in.

The man’s smile faltered a moment, and then he recovered. But it was no longer genuine. As we appraised each other, I knew innately that he could tell I knew the truth. I could be a danger to his place here. I plastered a smile on my face and pretended like he pretended. I pretended to be an innocent, guileless creature. I pretended that I wished him no harm.

My smile was wide enough to hurt. I took his hand and held it firmly. “So nice to meet you! An old friend of Gran’s—goodness! I had no idea she had friends outside Big Village. Where is it that you are from?”

“Ah, I’m from here. Long ago, I’m afraid. It is a pleasure to be home again.” He bestowed a true smile on Gran—at least, it looked more like a true smile than the one he’d given me. Gran eclipsed the sun in the look she returned to him.

What was going on with her? Was she under his spell?

“And to what do we owe the pleasure of your return?”

“A happy circumstance, I’m pleased to say. I came upon your village soon after you’d suffered terribly in that most dire attack by the wolves.” He tsked and shook his head. “Your Gran was in quite poor health, and her wishes regarding you had been disrespected in her weakness. I stepped in to help.” He smiled benevolently, as if he were simply happy to be of service.

I thought of Gran, bowing.

He wasn’t helping. He was in charge.

“With what, exactly, have you been helping?” My eyes fixed on his, and my smile disappeared. My face displayed the hardness I’d learned in the Woods. For here was my Gran, in perfect health. Here were trucks heaping with her Huntsmen, ready to wipe out their enemy for all time. And here was the man who’d created that enemy, leading them.

“Why, with the war, of course.” He smiled his silky smile, and his tongue snaked out to wipe the front of his teeth.

Gran rounded on me. She took my arm in her hand and squeezed. She gave me shakes to punctuate her words, wearing the angelic face of a woman who doubts nothing. “We’ll end them, Red. We’ll kill every wolf in the Woods.”

I thought of my wolf, and my craving for a warm bath crumbled to powder. My joy froze, cracking and hardening into determination. As we headed home, I ruminated on my mistake: I’d still thought of the village as a retreat from danger. I thought I could return here to the happiness of my naive childhood.

But it was in the heart of this village that an evil created the danger that infected the Woods. And when that evil returned to the gate and knocked, my Gran let him back in.

31

GRAN AND I headed home alone. The dispersing crowd of villagers didn't stop us as we led Flora to her barn to settle her in. Timber and I had arranged for Gran's entourage to discover her grazing free near the gate. I cried when we found her, and loudly told the story of our first night in the Woods, when she threw me from her back. To be sure we were convincing, Timber had tangled her coat and mane with forest detritus, and I took the time now to brush it all out.

The repetitive motions calmed me. It delighted me to see Flora's pleasure. When Gran wasn't looking, I snuck Flora's brush into my pocket. I wouldn't take her into the Woods again without it.

Gran waited patiently, leaning silently on the door frame. She preferred trucks to horses, claiming a man in a truck could kill a wolf in the time it took me to saddle up. Even so, she was the one who gave me Flora on my sixteenth birthday, and paid for the stall she lived in.

When I was finished, we continued home. The streets felt familiar and alien at once. I knew every brick of them, and yet each building felt like a monument to a time lost. I had never been away before and I processed the strange feelings in silence.

Beside me, only one arm swung at Gran's side. It gave her walk the appearance of tilting unsteadiness, though a closer look assured me she was as stable on her feet as before.

"Last I saw you," I said, "you were nearly dead. Tell me what happened since I left."

Gran's penetrating eyes looked me over. Like she noticed that I was different than before, but had not yet figured out how.

"They told me it was a close thing—I lost a lot of blood. I was barely conscious when Igor showed up at the gate, but I was awake enough to give

orders, thank god. They let him in, and he healed me. He's a powerful sorcerer, Red. His magic saved many of our injured."

To this I said nothing. It was not the time yet to tell her what I knew.

"First thing I did was banish Leanna, traitorous bitch."

"She's dead," I said. "I heard the wolves talking about it."

Gran shrugged, not an ounce of contrition on her face. "Did no worse to her than she did to you, poor helpless girl. I sent men out looking for you, but they came back saying you'd disappeared. I wanted to send parties deeper into the Woods, but we had too many injured to staff a large operation. It was decided—" and I knew she meant the sorcerer had decided "—that we would concentrate on resurrecting our army so we might sweep the Woods in force. I hoped then, we'd find you. All I could do was hope. Then a patrol near the gate picked up your friend Marta, who said she overheard wolves speaking of their red-headed captive. She told us the place and there you were..."

In her tone I heard suspicion. How unlikely it was that Marta, of all people, would hear of me. How lucky that I survived a month of captivity with all my limbs and sanity, and that I was left unguarded just where Marta said I would be. It was Timber's concern all along that Gran was too clever to believe such convenient turns of fate. I just had to hope her happiness at my return would override her wary nature.

I stopped walking and turned to her, opening my arms for a hug. Strange, only one strong arm coming around my back to pound it and bring me in tight. "Gran, you couldn't have done any better by me. I know you had to take care of all your people. You had a responsibility to the whole village. Not just to me."

She nodded, but I could see the tears in her eyes. She'd felt guilty every night I was out there. In Timber's arms.

"You are the last girl they will ever do this to, Red. Do you hear me? It's a promise. We are going to find their lair, kill every one of them, and make the Woods safe forever. Soon, my girl. Very soon."

To her promise of death I could say nothing. "I knew you would come for me," I said instead.

Gran seized my shoulder in her hand. Beneath her tight fingers I could feel a dull pain as she pressed on the scar tissue she did not know was there. "The Woods changes people," she said, with worry in her voice. She sensed already that I was changed, but changed how?

I smiled at her and grasped her hand. I squeezed it to comfort her. “I’m okay, Grandma. I am changed. But I’m still Red. And I’m home.”

After she settled me in, Gran went out. I stood staring at the porcelain tub, guilt and desire at war. “I do have to get clean,” I muttered to myself, a justification that did not entirely excuse the scented oils I poured into the water, or the amount of time I spent luxuriating in the hot bath, trailing my fingers lazily through the steam.

When I got out, the water was brown with dirt from my scrubbed pink skin. I caught a glimpse of one of my curls in the corner of my eye. It had lightened in color from all the sun. I bet I looked like a different person.

With a towel wrapped around me, I went to see. Over my dresser hung a small round mirror. The face that greeted me in it was almost a stranger. Hair more blond than red. Tan cheekbones and extra freckles. When I looked down at my body I saw more angles than before, and more scars too. It was strange to pull out a dress I’d sewn myself and put it on. The fabric felt too soft and pooled impractically around my ankles. It was hard to leave the axe behind when I left the cottage to walk to Marta’s.

As I walked the streets of the village, people I barely knew nodded their welcome. My return was the news of the day, and everybody had a smile for me. I smiled politely back and thanked them when they called out to me, but I kept walking. When Marta opened the door to my knock, I threw my arms around her and buried my cheek against her shoulder.

“I’m so glad you made it back safely,” I said. The words were muffled by her dress.

“Sampson made sure of it.”

I gave her a quick smile, but looked around automatically. I did not want to be overheard.

“My parents are out. Come in.”

Marta and I sank into her living room rockers. She stoked up the fire and we rocked and talked, rocked and talked.

“How’s Timber?”

I smiled, privately remembering the last nights we shared.

“That’s what I thought,” Marta said.

“You know,” I said carefully, “I’m surprised you’re okay with it.”

“Well, he’s not the best conversationalist, and I’d never go for a wolf myself—” she shuddered at the very thought “—but if he’s what you want,

I see nothing wrong. He seems like a good man. He saved you and me. And it's not like any other man has ever caught your interest."

She was right. I'd gone on the odd date here and there—mostly double dates with Marta. I'd even slept with a couple of guys. But none of them ever really captured my attention. Marta teased me for years that maybe I liked women. Everybody had wondered. Now I knew that the kind of man I wanted didn't grow in here. He wasn't the kind who could be happy behind an iron wall.

"Are you happy being back?"

"God, yes," Marta answered instantly. She looked at the crackling hearth fire and smiled. "Yes, I love it here, Red. I missed it so much." She looked out towards the Woods like she could see the trees through all the walls that kept them from her. "If I had my way, I don't think I'd ever leave again."

I felt an ache in my chest. Soon, Marta and I would go our separate ways. For all our lives, we'd walked hand in hand. Now I sought to return to Timber while she lived her life here. Someday, if the wall came down...if the curse was broken...perhaps we could both follow our own paths and still walk some moments side by side.

"How's Dylan?"

"Oh, good! I've been seeing him since I got back. Had a few dates now..."

I sat back in my chair as she regaled me with the details. Her eyes lit up as she told me about their first kiss. I smiled and laughed at all the right parts.

When her parents returned from work, I stood. "I've got to get back to Gran," I said. I could exchange stories with Marta for hours, but there was a more important story I had to tell.

I waited until after dinner, when Gran and I sat cozy in our rockers, pressing down our feet to take us back and forth, back and forth before the fire.

"Gran—"

I did not know how to begin.

"Gran...the wolves aren't how I thought they would be."

Gran smiled kindly. "I'm not surprised. A sheltered girl like you cannot imagine—"

I was already shaking my head. “No. I mean, yes. That too. But I mean...well, they’re men.”

She sat up straighter in her chair. “They assume the form of men. That is all, girl. Wolves are trickster beasts, at their most dangerous when they can speak.”

I shook my head. “No, they’re men. Men cursed to assume an animal form. Even when they look like wolves, they can reason like we can. Their shape changes, but their character—”

“Character!” Gran’s face twisted. “Wolves have no character. They are violence and hunger and teeth and claws.”

I thought of the Alpha. He would happily have ripped me to pieces, but his own ethical code held him back. “Some of them are. But they’re not all like that.”

Gran frowned at me, her face a mask of disbelief and disappointment. *Betrayer*, it said. *Silly, stupid girl.* I’d expected the reaction, though not so quickly. I hadn’t even told her about the apothecary yet. I thought carefully about how to go further.

“Gran, do you know when the violence started between the wolves and Big Village?”

Gran snorted. “They are wolves. We are humans. There has always been war.”

“So they were here before the first settlers came to start this place?”

She frowned, and her jaw clenched. She didn’t know. I could tell she didn’t know.

I started the story. “Once upon a time, Big Village had no wall. Its people lived in peace with the creatures of the woods. There were no wolves. Then one day a man came. He had yellow eyes and pointed ears and pointed teeth, and he made potions and practiced magics.”

Gran knew of whom I spoke. She held her body rigid in her rocker. Her hand twitched towards her axe, the habit of a lifetime. I took a deep breath and continued.

“There was a woman who lived in the village. A beautiful woman, and the yellow-eyed man wanted her for his wife. But she did not want him. So he stole her, married her, and locked her away in his workshop.

“The woman had four brothers—strong, young men—who knocked on his door, demanding the return of their sister. The yellow-eyed man met with them in private, and nobody knows what passed between them. The

next day, the four brothers went into the woods and did not return. A year later, four wolves walked into the village. Everybody was terrified of their giant size and monstrous teeth, but they didn't hurt anyone. They only went to the apothecary's house and stole away his wife.

"The apothecary called for a search. He called for a wall to surround the village. But the wolves returned again and again. They rescued the young daughter of the apothecary's wife, returning her to her mother. They retrieved the sweetheart of the youngest brother so that they might marry. Because the wolves were the four brothers, cursed by the yellow-eyed man —"

"Stop."

"Cursed to take a false form. Gran, the apothecary isn't the victim of the story, he's the villain. And Igor is that apothecary. I don't know how it's possible he's still alive, but you cannot trust him. He *created*—"

"STOP."

I fell silent and stared at Gran. She breathed heavily. She shifted in her chair and my attention fell on her missing right arm. The firelight carved a dark shadow into the old cut along her face.

"Let me tell *you* a story, child," Gran said, and her voice was kindling ready to spark. "Once upon a time, Big Village was constantly under attack by wolves. We sent Huntsmen out to fight them, but the evil trickster creatures impersonated the returning Huntsmen. They snuck into the village at night. In the day, they returned to their true form and they decimated the villagers. It was then that the village leader treated with the Alpha of the wolf pack. They struck a bargain.

"The wolves, who hungered for the blood of young women, would cease their attacks if the leader agreed to sacrifice one village girl to the wolf pack every year. She would be put outside alone for the wolves to do with as they pleased. The village leader agreed and a tenuous peace was struck, which lasted many years."

My heart beat fast. *The old pact is restored*, Timber had said to the Alpha. This must be what he meant. In sacrificing me, Leanna was not just honoring an old tradition. She was trying to revive a bargain, a blood pact I had never known of. It was not in our history books. It must've been classified, along with the very nature of the wolves themselves.

"When I was only twenty—just your age—my name was drawn. I was to be sacrificed. They took me outside the gate and left me alone. I found an

axe on the body of a fallen Huntsman. I didn't know how to use it, but I got lucky. When the wolves came for me, I fought them off."

My mouth fell open. I struggled to imagine my Gran as a young girl with an unscarred face, swinging an axe for the first time. I didn't have to imagine how terrified she must've been. I knew for myself.

"No one was coming to help me—that, I knew. I found shelter. I found food. I learned to wield the axe properly. I hid during the day and came out only at night. Once I realized the wolves looked like men at night, I killed any man I came across. I lived alone. I survived. For months.

"Then one day, in the light of the sun, I saw a man in the Woods. He looked like them. Yellow eyes and pointed teeth and ears. But I'd never seen a wolf take the shape of a man during the day, so I didn't kill him right away, although I almost did. I tied him to a tree and I waited until night, and then I waited until day again, axe at the ready. But he never changed. Instead, he spoke to me. He was kind. He was knowledgeable. He said he could treat the cut on my face—I'd just gotten it, see, and it was healing badly. So eventually I untied him and we became friends. Companions. I learned to trust him, and I came to love him."

Gran, in love. I'd never known. She'd always refused to answer any questions about my grandfather. I stopped asking them long ago.

"One day, I woke up and he was gone. A year after my day of exile, I returned to the gate. They opened it to sacrifice another girl and found me. I demanded to be allowed back inside, and they agreed. They honored their side of the bargain, they reasoned. It wasn't their fault the wolves didn't take what was offered.

"After that I joined the Huntsmen, and I was already rising through the ranks when I had your mother. Igor's daughter." Gran fixed me with a dagger stare. She dared me to speak against him again, this man she loved. Who saved her, cared for her, when she was utterly alone.

How naive I was. I didn't even know my own Gran.

"When your mother came of age, her name was drawn from the lottery. I was in charge by then, thank all the gods, and I forbid her sacrifice. I stopped the sacrifices altogether and had the shameful practice struck from our records. No other girl would be cast out into the Woods as I had been. No more would we bargain with wolves.

"I knew it would mean war and I began preparing. The truth is, I expected an incursion to come years sooner. All the wolves know is violent

hunger and lust. Your grandfather has returned at the perfect time. We will end them together.”

I went to bed but could not sleep.

My grandfather. It was almost too strange to believe. I was the blood of a fairy tale villain. Did I have magic, like Selma did? I almost laughed at the idea.

Memories filtered back to me of things I’d thought I understood, but hadn’t. *This child is the spawn of our greatest enemy*, Rommel had said. I figured he meant Gran. No wonder the Alpha had bargained for me; no wonder the wolves hated me as they did. Had they all known?

Timber had, I realized. He told me the story of how Gran got her scar; he must’ve also known how she healed it. Why didn’t he tell me?

I wished Timber were here right now so I could pummel him with my fists and scream at him to vent my confusion. He would stand solidly, hands in his pockets, and wait me out in silence. Then he would take me into his arms and say something that was not an apology at all, but would somehow make me understand.

I lay awake all night. In the morning, I slipped out early, tiptoeing past the closed door to Gran’s room. Bonded by love, magic and shared hatred, she would not turn against my grandfather. Together, they would march us to war.

But maybe I could do something to prove my accusations. Maybe proof would make Gran listen. And what better proof than to break his curse?

32

THE VILLAGE WAS still sleeping when I quietly closed the door to our cottage and ventured into the streets. Sparkling frost decorated the stalks of flowers planted along the road. Thin ice coated the cobblestoned street and chilled my feet through my soft-soled shoes. When the sun rose, it would melt. I shivered in my one-armed coat. Perhaps while I was here, I could replace the sleeve, though I did not think I could match the color.

I walked towards the old apothecary shop. In my memory it was a tower, standing over hovels with collapsed roofs. Inside, the wood floor was rotted and stained, littered with broken glass.

The gaping holes in the stairs up to the second story offered an exciting and unique challenge for children. They had no idea that a young woman had once been kept captive at the top.

In those dirty, abandoned corners, would I find what I needed? Selma assured me that once, the apothecary had worn the canine tooth of a wolf around his neck. He was said to have fingered the powerful token as he cast his curse. But I couldn't expect such a precious item to still be there, gathering dust in a corner, after hundreds of years.

"But it has to be there," I said to myself. "I have to find these things."

The apothecary shop stood in the old quarter, near the village square. By the time I arrived, the village was awake. The shops were open. Patrons hurried past me, children threw balls across the street. But the ruins were not as I remembered.

In the apothecary's tower, lights flickered behind windows of solid glass. Outside, the clay walls were white and clean. The creaky tilted door had been replaced with a hearty new one, and the roof showed signs of repair. The sorcerer had taken up his old residence once more.

Gone was my chance of sneaking in unnoticed. Gone were any ghosts that once lingered in the corners. And yet, perhaps this only increased my

chances. Selma said that once, the sorcerer wore the talisman around his neck. Did he still? When I met him yesterday, I was so surprised I had not thought to look.

I knocked on his door.

“A moment!” he called from inside.

I clasped my hands to stop them shaking, wishing I had taken the gloves Marta knitted me. The apothecary threw the door open with flourish. His unnatural eyes darted behind and around me before settling on my face. The pasted on smile appeared and he opened his hands in delight and welcome.

“Red! What a pleasure and a surprise.”

“Can I come in?”

His smile did not falter for a moment. “Of course.” He stepped back and gestured for me to enter. I strode past him, the fabric of my dress swirling around my legs.

Yes, he’d cleaned the place up, so effectively that I felt sure he’d used magic. How else could he have gotten the floor so shining and healthy? A glance at the stairs showed no missing steps. Not a fragment of glass or a puff of dust littered the ground. Instead, a thick-slabb'd wooden table filled the space. On its surface, potions filtered through tubes to drip into vials. They bubbled in cauldrons heated by balls of floating fire. The air was heavy with vapor and a sweet scent like dying flowers. The walls were cluttered with shelves, and his potions sat on these too, labeled with prices written in a tight cramped hand. It looked more like a shop than a home, with only a single blanket-covered rocker offering warmth or comfort.

“You’ve really cleaned up the place.” I walked the room, seeming to admire, searching for a tooth. But I saw none. Perhaps upstairs, where his real workshop was. I turned back to him and fixed my eyes on his neck, but the stiff collar of his vibrant blue and yellow coat showed no skin below his wrinkled chin. No tooth hung above the golden buttons on his chest; if he still wore the talisman, he kept it below his clothes.

“Yes, yes. See anything you’re interested in?” He walked over to hover near a shelf. “A pinch of this powder banishes bad memories. I’m sure you have plenty of those, after your last month amongst the wolves.”

I tried to smile. “No thanks.” I took a step towards the door. With surprising quickness, he took a step to block me.

“I’m pleased you stopped by today, Red. I have a few questions to ask you. Your Gran wished to allow you some time to regain your equilibrium,

but since you're here..."

"Yes?"

"She said you were found in a cave. Apparently the wolves kept you captive there for weeks."

"Yes."

"Did they take you anywhere else? Perhaps to their lair?"

I shook my head. "No, I was lost and then they captured me and brought me straight there."

"Did you see their faces? How many were there?"

"Three," I said with certainty, remembering the cabin full of rotted meat. "A tall one, and a very short one with dark hair, and one with long blond curls. That's what they looked like as men, of course. They were mostly men when I saw them."

He clucked his tongue as he shook his head. His expression became so mournful, I almost believed it. "A shameful disguise. They must've done such awful things to you."

I said nothing.

"But how is it you could not manage an escape?"

How should I look? Shocked that he would blame me for my captivity? Helpless? Ashamed?

"How could I?" I said. "I'm not a warrior. Anyway, they kept me chained."

"Chained? My goodness." He wandered to a new shelf. "Chained for a month without relief. You must have such cuts and scars around your wrists. These creams assist with healing." His smile became mocking and I knew he did not believe me. I stumbled towards the door.

"I have to go," I said. "Maybe another time."

"Of course," he called after me as I slammed the heavy wooden door closed and took a deep breath of fresh, unscented air.

Once upon a time, the old quarter was all there was of the village. Just a few shops and houses, clustered around a small square. I tried to imagine what it would have been like to watch birds nesting in trees from one of these windows. No bunkers, no wall, no fear.

Now they were the oldest buildings we had. Framed signs proudly proclaimed the year each home was built. Most had been lovingly cared for. Tidy gardens and freshly painted fronts opened to refinished kitchens and

restored wood. Here and there, an abandoned cottage upset the charm with boarded windows and peeling paint.

I hoped the old butcher's shop would be one of those. The symbol of a cleaver dangling precariously from a single rusty rod. I would go inside and find things just as they had once been, long ago.

But I could not find my way to it. The old quarter was its own neighborhood and I did not shop here. I turned each corner, peering curiously at the signs that swung above each door. An outline of a stalk of corn promised fresh greens from the farm sector. The image of a sheep told me where I could find wool to give to Gran for her knitting. But where was the cleaver that would hang above the butcher's?

I stopped an elderly man who walked past. "Excuse me." His head rose; he'd been carefully watching each step. In one shaking hand he held a cane. For a moment I was struck by how different his aged face looked from my grandfather's. It was the kindness in the dark eyes, I thought, and the careless stubble across his chin. Over his chest he wore a wool coat with loose buttons. "I'm looking for the butcher's shop in this quarter."

"Going that way myself," he said. "Walk with me." In a village such as ours, even strangers were friends. I took his free arm and walked alongside him down the cobblestoned street. "You're the girl they brought home yesterday from the Woods. Big parade, blocked up the streets."

"Yes."

"How was it out there?"

I considered my answer. He asked with no assumption in his voice, only curiosity. I could not tell if he'd spent years as a strapping young Huntsman or never seen the outside of the gate. "It's not how I expected," I said honestly. "It's very alive out there. Trees and animals and plants all around."

"And wolves."

"Yes, wolves."

He eyed me as we hobbled on at our slow pace. "You weren't frightened. You're like her, your Gran."

"I was frightened sometimes." I did not want to discuss it. "Do you live around here?"

"Just there! I've been in that house since I was a child, and my parents and grandparents before that. This is all the village I need, right here."

I knew he meant just the old quarter. I wondered if he ever ventured more than a few blocks away. “You must know a lot about the history of the place.”

“I know everything.”

“Lately I’ve thought of an old story Gran used to tell, about a sorcerer with yellow eyes and pointed ears.”

“Our new Supreme General,” the old man said.

“That’s right. But it’s an old tale, about when he first came to the village.”

“He lived right over there.” He pointed up at the second story of the apothecary’s tower. “Took up residence again just a month ago.”

“He married a woman from around here, didn’t he?”

“Back when he came before?”

“Yes, yes, in the old days, when this was all there was.” I gestured to the old quarter.

“That’s right. Butcher’s daughter, I believe. So say the stories. Ask him yourself. It was long before my time. Don’t know how a man lives so long. Not sure I’d fancy it.”

“Do you know where the butcher’s shop was in that time?”

“In the same place!” the old man said. “Once you have a room proper for slaughtering pigs, why move it?”

This was an unpleasant thought, but I felt a thrill at his words anyway. He was leading me to the right place then. The home where the four brothers once lived. I hoped for peeling paint and ancient wooden barns.

We turned a final corner and the old man lifted his arm and pointed. “There it is, right there, dear. Exceptional sausage. Make sure you order some.” I thanked him as my heart fell.

The butcher’s shop practically gleamed with newness. A polished sign swung above an over-sized door. Everything shined as white as the Huntsmen’s military complex. Clearly, the style had been appropriated for this building. It loomed over the tiny, picturesque cottages on either side. No framed numbers celebrated its history.

“But it’s new,” I called out after the old man. “It’s all new.”

“Get the sausage,” he called back. I thought he probably hadn’t heard me.

A bell chimed above my head as I entered. The inside was as I expected. Polished surfaces and a tidy meat display. A cheerful woman greeted me

and I ordered sausage.

“Awfully glad you’re alright,” said this woman I’d never met.

“Thank you. Is this shop new?”

“Oh, there’s always been a butcher shop here, since ages, and my husband’s family has owned it the last twenty years. But yes,” she beamed, “the shop itself is new. A few years ago we just razed it to the ground and started over.”

I tried to smile around at the cold white decor, clearly her pride and joy.
“Are any of the old buildings left?”

She shook her head. “We even redid the barns, to match.”

I wanted to scream. Instead, I thanked her for the sausage. As I turned to leave, a rug in the center of the floor caught my eye. Faded, colorful and old, it did not match anything else in the shop. Too small for the large space, it lay in the center of the waxed wooden floor as if someone had forgotten to pick it up. It was only on my walk home that it occurred to me what it might be hiding. A bunker. A bunker where the butcher’s basement used to be.

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AS SOON AS I realized what the old rug might cover, I almost turned right back around. I saw no reason why the butcher's wife would say no if I asked to look inside her bunker, and I itched to find something. But she knew who I was. Her neighborhood included the apothecary's shop. He probably bought her sausages. Perhaps when he next came in to purchase some, she would tell him of the curious behavior of Gran's granddaughter, the famous girl who returned from the Woods. I couldn't risk inviting his interference. I would go back at night.

I waited until after midnight, when the pubs were closed and the streets were empty. Gran was snoring in her room. I left my signature coat behind, choosing an old brown one instead. It smelled like too much time at the bottom of a drawer. With it, I donned my leather pants and boots. I pulled on Marta's gloves and covered my hair with a scarf. I snuck across the village like a thief.

It was easier than I expected. At night, the villagers slept. No guards patrolled our streets; our military only looked outward.

The apothecary's lights were on. I ducked low so that he could not look out a window and see me as I passed his shop. I turned each corner, following the path the old man had walked with me that morning. I came to the butcher's shop.

I already knew it would be unlocked. Our law required any building containing a bunker to remain open; citizens must be able to access their assigned bunker at all times. Theft in these places was punished as severely as murder, making them some of the most secure in Big Village.

I circled around the building, peering in the windows for anyone awake. I saw a large room with drains in the floor, a cold room filled with ice, and a packing room stocked with twine and paper. No bedrooms or kitchen—the

family must live in one of the matching buildings around back. There was no one in the butcher shop.

I squinted across the empty street but I saw no eyes watching. It was strange to search for them behind buildings instead of branches. I grasped the latch and opened the door.

It swung in silently and I blessed the newness of its hinges. I closed it behind me and went right to the rug. I threw back the fraying edge and saw what I came for: a trapdoor. I opened it and passed through, pulling it closed behind me. I descended carefully down the dark stairs. It was not until I reached the bottom that I lit my lantern. I could not risk anyone seeing a hint of its light.

On first glance, the bunker looked like any other. A vast square room with a packed dirt floor and walls lined with supplies. I cast my light against the walls to look closer. Were the wooden shelves original? What about the cold lantern that hung above my head? With great care I pored over every detail. My light was nearly out of oil when I slumped against the shelving, on the verge of tears. My back ached. Had I been down here for hours? Not a single thing made this bunker different than any other. I had no idea where to look next.

I put out my light and dragged my stiff body up the stairs. I put the rug back as it had been and closed the door to the butcher's shop. I trudged away along the darkened street.

That afternoon, I sewed a new sleeve onto my jacket. A trip to the varnish-maker proved the special color was a lost treasure, so I chose a green that I imagined would blend in well in the Woods.

Dinner was ready when Gran came home. I could see the suspicious look on her face transform into awe as she leaned low to sniff the sausages I'd fried with mushrooms and onions. I never could cook, and Gran knew it. As her eyes roved over her plate, I saw the questions and suppositions that formed in her mind. How had I learned these skills when I was chained by a gang of wolves? Perhaps they forced me to cook for them. Perhaps they left me to starve, and I learned on my own.

"You going to cook from now on?" She didn't change out of her leathers before sitting down. She wore them always, except to bed.

"I can do that. If you only want to eat four things."

“Igor is coming to dinner tomorrow night, so make three plates.” The set of her jaw spoke of her determination that we come to like each other.

I nodded but said nothing. We ate in silence, the disagreement of the other day still between us.

“This was good. Make these again tomorrow,” Gran said as she stood to clear her plate.

“Afraid the other three things won’t be as good?” I teased.

Gran went to her rocker and I sat in mine. Her with her knitting and me with my thread. Like old times. Gran’s mending had accumulated in a basket while I was gone, and I worked my way through it as she knitted me a sweater that she said would go with my eyes. I felt guilt and gratitude at once. It would be winter when I went back into the Woods; Gran’s sweater would help keep me warm as I abandoned her.

“Gran,” I finally said, “tell me a story.” I did not look at her, gazing instead at the flames of the orange fire in our hearth.

“I thought you didn’t believe my stories anymore.”

I did not answer her. The silence swelled. The fire made the room hotter than I’d become used to, and I stripped down to my tank top. My scars were dots across my shoulder, tight and pink.

Gran saw them and they pulled her back in time; I saw her remembering when she was once like me, a girl only just returned from the Woods. How many scars like this dotted her body? I had never seen; I didn’t know.

“When you’re out there,” Gran said quietly, “it feels like the only place in the world. The village doesn’t even feel real, almost. You’re caught in a dream and don’t know it’s a dream.”

Her face had softened and she looked far away. Almost wistful, but what was it she yearned for? I thought of the magic and beauty of the wild. I wanted to hear about what she loved most. Together we could pine after remembered freedoms.

“Yes, I remember, girl. I remember…

“...but it isn’t real. The wolves are tricksters, manipulative. It was them that told you that story, wasn’t it? And you believed them. I raised you to be smarter than that. But I understand. I understand.

“Once upon a time,” Gran said, and her voice now was the fairy tale voice she always used to tell her tales, a sing-song sound quite unlike her usual deep gruffness, “there was a girl who found herself walking alone down a path through the Woods. She had only a basket with her, filled with

some food and gloves from her mother. Across her back, she wore her favorite red coat.”

Was the girl Gran? It must be. Finally, she told me the true story of herself.

“The girl’s mother cried when she watched her only child go out into the Woods. ‘There is a rumor,’ she whispered, ‘of a safe place deep in the trees. They call it Grandmother’s House. They say that only women live there. Find your way to Grandmother’s House and maybe she can keep you safe.’ It was all she had to give—a basket of food and a rumor.

“When the gate closed, the girl did not cower beneath it or pound her fists against the wood. Instead, I strode forward, intending to walk deep into the Woods towards Grandmother’s House. As night fell, I found a dead Huntsman, stripped of all but his axe. I picked it up and took it with me.

“Soon after, a wolf approached me wearing the uniform of a Huntsman. I knew nothing then of their deceptions, or how they could change their shape. Yet something about him felt wrong to me. He carried no axe, and his clothes did not fit him well.

“He did not attack me—not at first. He said he’d help me. Come off the path with him, he urged. Nearby there was a stream where I could take a drink. He could help me find food to survive.

“I told him I didn’t want to leave the path. The path could take me deep into the Woods towards Grandmother’s House, a place where I would be safe. ‘I will take you there myself,’ the wolf promised, ‘if you only come with me to the stream.’

“By then, I had realized it was he who killed the Huntsman I found. I assumed he was a defector, and I did not want him to know I was suspicious. I agreed to his terms and followed him off the path. When he wasn’t looking, I hit him over the head with my axe and ran. I got lost, of course. He came after me and I hid. When dawn touched him and he began to change, I watched in horror. His face lengthened into a snout, his body grew fur. What big ears he had, what big teeth. Before the transformation was complete, I killed him. I left the mangled monster behind; I drank from the stream and took my first steps towards survival.

“It was months later when I finally found my way to Grandmother’s House. It is a real place, as I suspect you know.” Gran eyed me, and I kept my face carefully blank. Timber’s plan to keep the secrets of the Woods seemed so silly now. She knew them all already. “By then, my reputation

had preceded me. ‘This is a place of peace,’ they told me. ‘You’ve killed too many of our brothers to be welcome.’

“So I left them. I found myself an abandoned cottage and I made it my home while I finished out my year of exile. It was then that I started calling myself Gran. I needed a new name, you see. The girl I’d been in Big Village was dead by then. And I’d spent months thinking of Grandmother’s House as the safest place in the Woods. So I made myself Gran. I made my own safe place. And after your mother died, I tried to protect you too, my girl. I tried to protect everyone. I tried.” She tapered off as if my trials made a personal failure of her.

“There’s such a thing as too safe,” I said. “Too protected. It makes you afraid all the time, it makes you incapable. I mean, if you could take back your time in the Woods, if you could change it, would you?”

“No.”

“Me either.”

We sat and studied each other. It wasn’t like old times at all. In the old days, I thought I could never be like her. Now I knew how much I was.

34

THE NEXT MORNING I walked once more to the old quarter. I needed more sausages for tonight's dinner, which was as good an excuse as any. I greeted the butcher with an overdone smile, afraid she might somehow know what I'd gotten up to under her floorboards, but she only smiled and said she was pleased I liked the sausages.

From there, I wandered, the paper and twine package dangling listlessly in my hand. The butcher's shop was the center of my ever-widening circle. I scanned the homes and shops and villagers for nothing in particular. I felt sure somehow that what I sought would jump out at me.

I was four blocks from the butcher's when I stopped to survey an old cottage.

It wasn't much to admire. Rats and mice scurried under the door and skirted the perimeter as a small bird flew in through a hole in the roof. An overgrown garden nurtured nettles and crabgrass. The cottage's wooden siding was soft and dark with age. NO TRESPASSING, said paint on the door.

The tall fence I leaned against was in even worse shape. More than half the pickets were snapped or missing, the casualties of children with high energy.

This was what I'd hoped to find at the butcher's shop. I wondered who the owners were. All evidence suggested they no longer cared for the property, and I considered walking up to the door and entering in spite of the painted warning. But when I looked at the fence gate, I found it locked with a heavy lock. Nearly the size of my fist, it was so orange with rust that I doubted a key would even do its job.

I looked down the length of the fence for a hole I could duck through. But despite its many shattered planks, the fence made a fortress. Scrap pieces of wood in all sizes and colors had been nailed onto the decaying

frame to replace what was lost. Placed in seemingly random, diagonal directions, they filled the holes and spiked up towards the sky. Whoever had done this strange work clearly cared nothing for how the fence looked, but very much wished to avoid trespassers.

A scavenged scrap of cedar shingle drew my eye. There was some kind of artwork on it. I leaned in to see a tree. Full leaves suggested summer, and roots grew strong beneath a thick trunk. The roots circled outward and up, until the lines of the roots met the leaves, making a circle around the picture.

I had seen it before. Where had I seen it before?

Slowly, I reached out my hand and pressed my fingers to the symbol, which had been burnt into the wood. My fingertips tingled and my heartbeat raced. I felt hot and certain. Excited, though I didn't know why. Where had I seen this before??

Blood trickling over the image. A muscle flexing, red on black ink. A sick feeling in my gut. And the vindication of looking at an unmoving body covered in black fur.

Jay. This tree was tattooed on the arm of my captor.

I took my hand off the symbol. I stood still, trying to make sense of my discovery. Jay was not the only wolf with this tattoo; other men at the Alpha's lair wore it too. Mostly short and stocky men with dark hair.

So an image that marked a faction of the pack also appeared here, in the village. Jay's ancestor was one of the brothers whose artifact I sought. Could this be his symbol? I'd never seen it anywhere else.

I thought of the story. The oldest brother was a woodcutter, and the Alpha's ancestor. Selma already had his axe. The youngest brother, Timber's ancestor, had left behind his wife's wedding ring. But Jay's ancestor was a hunter whose bow and arrow would long since have decayed. Would a hunter mark himself with the image of a tree? He might.

If he had, that left only Rommel's ancestor, the son who took after his father. He threatened the apothecary with his cleaver on that fateful night.

With a sharp tug, I ripped the cedar shingle from the patchwork fence. Certainly nobody would notice it was gone; the jagged edge I'd made would blend perfectly with all the others. The owner would come along eventually and replace it with more scavenged material. I put the wood piece in my pocket and hurried away.

I could only hope it was what I thought it was: wood scavenged from the old butcher shop, before it was torn down. A symbol burnt into this wood by the third brother himself.

Selma would be able to tell me if my invented story was true. For now, I had to content myself with this: it just felt right.

I walked rapidly away, worried that people would notice the strange shape in my pocket. I kept my head down, but it seemed that every villager now recognized me and wanted to stop to exchange words. They congratulated me on my safe return; they asked desperate questions about lost loved ones; they asked with bright eyes what the Woods were truly like. I gave rote answers, my eyes wandering and my feet itching to keep walking. Eventually, I ducked my chin and pretended not to see the people who sought my attention as I walked briskly past.

Winter was nearly here. I tasted its crisp air in my lungs. The wind smelled fresh and wet, like incoming snow. I looked towards the horizon but found only the white mass of the wall. The edge of our cage. It didn't always feel that way to me, at least not as forcefully as it did now.

I cast my memory back into the Woods and tried to pinpoint the moment I changed.

*When I decided to cross the river.
My hands on his wet fur cheeks.
Our legs entwined on the bed.
Or before that.*

I could not identify a single moment. Like all real change, it had happened gradually. But it had happened. A different woman walked the cobblestoned streets of the village now.

I found myself heading towards the village center. There was the post where Gran chained up the wolf. He was the first wolf I ever saw, and just before nightfall she killed him. There was the square, painted freshly with red where Gran lost her arm in battle. There was the hospital they brought her to. The windows were still broken and boarded up from the attack that day. I shuddered at my memories of the bodies.

Now that I was looking, I saw that the village was not as I remembered it after all. The lingering signs of the last attack were everywhere. Houses with patched roofs, wood-covered windows, or new doors. All about me, tiny patches of flowers struggled to thrive—memorials to fallen loved ones.

The more I noticed, the angrier I got. There, a new bed of flowers beneath the window of the school. There, the blackened ruins of a truck that had not been cleared away. A sign on a post asked brave young men and women to join up to become Huntsmen. Inside me, fury whirled like embers stirred back to life.

The man I now knew was my grandfather did this. His curse robbed generations of men of their humanity. Yes, the wolves killed, but my grandfather was the true thief of lives. He poisoned our world, replacing freedom with fear, and humanity with violence.

With this thought, I knew that I was walking these streets to say goodbye. I observed my surroundings again, focusing now on the familiar rather than the new. The baker's. The flower cart. The feed shop. The library, which I once thought contained the true history of the world. Maybe I would check out a book to take away with me when I left. I drank in the sight of the old slanting roofs. Smoke from chimneys made puffs of white in the grey air.

A stranger with a face I knew greeted me, and this time I raised my hand and waved back. I pulled down my scarf and called to him about the weather. How many strangers with familiar faces walked the streets in this village? Many—that was how you knew you were home. But it wasn't home anymore.

I filled Gran's hearth with my cooking. Fruit popped in a hanging pot. Fresh sausages fried with vegetables from the market. I threw potatoes into the embers and I whipped milk into cream. Fat dripped and sizzled on ash and wood. The flames flared in response to each drip, and the whole cottage began to smell like a crisp outside and a juicy inside.

Gran blinked twice when she came inside. By then it was getting dark, and my mind was far off in the Woods. If I were out there now, I would hear that familiar nightly howl. I would be smiling, knowing Timber was about to arrive. Instead, it was the company of my grandfather I had to look forward to.

“Smells good,” Gran said. Even after last night, her face betrayed an uncertainty that I was the one responsible. She glanced out the window, perhaps expecting to see Marta's back disappearing into the dusk.

Gran insisted I change into a clean dress. She set the table herself, and jumped when the knock came on the door. At the sound, a flutter raced

through me and my heartbeat sped up. I felt I had been running from something and only just stopped.

I reached into the fire with the tongs to retrieve my wrinkled potatoes as Gran rushed towards the door. I rubbed each one on my apron, blackening the front, before dropping them into a bowl. I put the bowl on the table. Steam rose off the browned sausages. On the side table, my fruit and cream waited for dessert. I'd made a romantic feast for my evil grandfather and me.

Gran reached across her body strangely to twist the doorknob with her left hand. It drew my eye to her stump, hidden beneath the rolled-up sleeve of her white dress. For once, she wore something other than leathers, and I could not stop thinking she looked like she was in pajamas.

"Igor, come in." Her smile was a ray of light. She gestured towards the spread, drawing his eyes to it. "My Red made us all a wonderful meal."

"Marvelous," my grandfather said in his silky voice. "Red, how good to see you again. May I give you my coat?" It was the same garish coat as before, brightly colored with a stiff collar and too many buttons. As soon as he slid it down his arms, I searched his chest for a dangling tooth. But he wore a tan shirt with another high collar, and if a necklace lay beneath this, I still could not see it. I took the coat and I draped it casually across the back of the chair he'd sit in. Gran's eyes narrowed at my refusal to hang it up properly, and so did Igor's.

Deliberately, Gran pulled his attention back to the table. "Please, sit, sit. Can I get you a drink?"

"Just water, Mary. Thank you."

Mary?! Nobody called Gran anything but Gran. Not the villagers or the Huntsmen or the wolves. Nobody.

"Her name's Gran," I said stubbornly. I knew I sounded like a child, but inside me my heartbeat raced and all I could see in this colorfully dressed old man was the villain from a fairy tale.

Igor laughed. "Ah, but I knew your Gran before she was Gran."

"That's not true. Gran told me the story of how you met. You met in the Woods when she was a young woman. She'd already started calling herself Gran."

We sat at the table. Igor took Gran's seat at the head, and she and I sat on either side.

“She was about your age, in fact.” He ignored my correction. He sat back in his chair and let out a little laugh. I could see the effort he put into keeping himself limber and relaxed, but the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes did not get any deeper when he smiled. “Mary, doesn’t this remind you of the first spread you ever made me? After you let me off that tree, that is.”

My Gran blushed and smiled. She remembered every second of their time together; I felt sure of it. I didn’t know this sycophantic love-struck woman before me. I found myself frowning.

We dug into our food.

“What a pleasant meal, Red. Thank you.”

“A wolf taught me to cook,” I said.

Igor said nothing.

“Before him, I really didn’t know how to do much of anything. My time with him was very educational. He told the most interesting stories.”

Silence, though Gran’s eyes screamed a warning at me to stop. When I was a child, that look could terrify me, freeze me in my tracks.

“He told this one story about how wolves first came to be in the Woods. It was especially interesting because it explained why the wolves were willing to surrender the village just to get their hands on me. You know the most interesting stories are always the ones that teach us about ourselves.”

The apothecary turned his head slowly and fixed me with his yellow-eyed stare. “I can’t imagine what goes on in the minds of those sick beasts as they concoct their deceptions.”

I leaned towards him holding my table knife upright. My fingers were clenched red around it. “You’re lying.”

“Red!” It was the first time in years Gran admonished me for rudeness; I didn’t even look at her.

The yellow-eyed man smiled. Ice cold, and his eyes burned fire.

“Alright then,” I said. “I’ll tell you. The wolves wanted me because I’m your blood.”

“Utter nonsense. Mary is no blood of mine, nor were the dozens of other girls sacrificed through the years. The wolves hurt the innocent girls of the village for pleasure. They have no other reason.”

“To save us from you. To exact revenge. Trust me, they have other reasons. But they all seem to come back to you. To the day you stole a woman who didn’t want to be your wife and cursed her brothers. In fact, the wolves only exist because of you.”

There was no warmth in him now. Though the orange fire lit him from behind, he was a white thing like a ghost at our table. I saw his ancientness, and the dark magics he used to battle it. All I needed was for him to say one word, to admit the truth where Gran could hear.

“Red, stop this nonsense now. I command it.” My Gran was back to her military-commander self. She wielded her authority in her lover’s defense. “Igor, I’m sorry. Red came out of the Woods with a silly story about the origin of the wolves. I told her the wolves do this—they tell their lies and they twist the mind. I told her it was all untrue. I told her how you saved me, how grateful she should be to you, her grandfather. And I thought she’d listened.”

She glared at me, but I could not see her. My grandfather and I would not take our eyes off each other. We were fixed on each other like hands clasped tight together and we were spinning, spinning. Picking up speed as we sat there silent and unmoving. The world around us whirled. I could feel power gathering in the air.

Then my grandfather broke the spell. He gave Gran his practiced smile, smooth as honey. “Oh my darling, I know as well as you what the wolves can do with their lies and their manipulations. Red is just so recently back from that nightmare. She’s forgotten how to behave. She’s forgotten the truths you taught her as a child. But she’ll remember. She’ll remember that every one of those beasts is just a dog in men’s clothing. No humanity in them, no truth. Just animal lust and violence.”

“No one can remember a lie once they learn the truth,” I said quietly. “No one leaves the path and comes back to it the same. I know what’s true. I know who you are. I’ll stop you.”

The yellow-eyed man laughed. Truly laughed, deep wrinkles around his eyes. He tossed his head and the flames danced on his cheeks. “You’ll stop me from what, little girl?”

Gran looked worriedly between us. Her eyes betrayed her disappointment in me. I saw that she wished only for love between my grandfather and I. She did not know how to bring us to it now. Her plan for dinner had failed and she sat helpless in her white dress and cap.

“I’ll stop you from killing the wolves. I’ll stop you from escalating the war. I’ll save Gran and this village from your spell. I’ll help everyone see the truth.”

“Big threats, little girl.” He breathed these words out, leaning towards me. His breath smelled of onions and something dead. Our whispered words were daggers, sharper than axe blades.

“I won’t do it alone.” I fixed on Gran and drank in the sight of her. I counted her as my ally even though she had not declared herself. And he saw it. They both did.

I stood from the table. “I’m going for a walk. Dessert’s on the side table.”

I left them sitting silently. Perhaps he would stay, and they would comfort each other over the rudeness of their granddaughter. Perhaps they’d fight and argue as Gran came to my side. Either way, I’d have time. I had a search to conduct, and the apothecary was not home.

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I LEFT MY grandparents alone and walked hurriedly towards the apothecary's shop. Lanterns hung from posts along the street, the low flames flickering illumination. Big flakes of snow twirled down lazily from the sky.

Igor might leave Gran at any time; I would have to be quick.

When I came to his tower there was no light in the windows. I tried the latch and it moved for me easily; the new door swung open as if beckoning me inside. Why didn't he lock it?

Perhaps he welcomed a break-in—who knew what nasty spells waited for me behind this door? Perhaps he couldn't imagine anyone invading his shop. Or perhaps he knew I would come and he said, "Go ahead, Red. Try and search. You won't find anything."

Inside, it was not as dark as I expected. The air smelled sweet, like dying flowers. On his massive, thick-slab table, potions glowed in strange colors, reminding me of Selma's cottage. The balls of hanging fire beneath the cauldrons cast their dancing shadows. I saw a lantern and reached for it. I turned the knob and a new fire flared to life. The room took on a yellow glow, radiating out from where I stood. The corners remained shadowed.

I'd searched this room already, but I swept it quickly again. I listened for any suggestion of a trap door beneath my feet as I circled, eyes scanning the shelves. No teeth.

"Don't you need a human tooth," I'd joked with Selma, "to make wolves human?"

"It's *his* spell I'm breaking. I need what he used," she said.

"Okay, but can't you just take one off some dead body?"

"It might work. It *might*. But I'd feel a lot more confident if I had the kind of tooth he used. Was it a tooth from an enchanted wolf or a natural

one? Was it from a northern wolf, or a grey wolf, or a plains wolf? I need what he used."

But there was nothing like that here. Potions and powders, packaged and ready for sale. His works-in-process on the table, beside a pile of discarded supplies. A knitted blanket on a single rocker by the hearth. A basin beside a pitcher on a stand. Nowhere did I see his raw ingredients. It must all be upstairs.

The wooden stairs creaked as I crept up them. I don't know why I went so slowly and cautiously, as if I hoped to avoid waking someone. There was no one here.

I came to the landing and I held up my light. I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't a thin, old bed and a wash station. The room was so small, it could hardly fit anything else. I considered the shape of the building from the outside. It was a cylindrical tower; this room should be the same size as the one downstairs. Where was the rest of it?

I circled the edges of the plain bedroom. What a strange home, with no kitchen and only a single chair. I stomped on the floor, listening for hollowness. I ran my hand along the wall, feeling for cracks.

Ah-ha! A crack beneath my fingers. I traced it, revealing the shape of a door. I dug my fingertips in and tried to pry it open.

"Come on," I said, "come on, open up."

The door opened with no sound, its hidden hinges well-oiled. I cast my light inside.

It was a closet larger than his bedroom. Shelving lined every wall, ceiling to floor. On these sat his ingredients. I held my lantern up and peered into each jar. Acania petals, herbs, dried fungi. Chicken feet, rabbit feet, the pointed teeth of a small animal. Powders I could not identify and liquids I did not dare touch. There was a small table in the center of the space. It was empty except for a few tools, neatly laid out at perfect angles. A cleaver, a spoon, a cup. The space was immaculate and private, almost sacred. I imagined him all those eons ago, brewing his curses in this room. Perhaps his wife pounded on the hidden door and begged him to stop.

I looked in every tin. I shook every cloth bag. I even opened a few bottles and poured them out to reveal their clouded contents. There were no teeth in the room.

I wished the table had a chair, so that I could slump down in it and nurse my defeat. Instead I leaned my fists upon the table and hung my head.

The silver of the cleaver's blade flashed against my eyes. It was sharp and well-cared for. It had been honed many times over the years, and the handle showed its age as the blade did not. I reached out to touch the well-worn wood, honey-colored and soft. When I picked the tool up, I could smell the oil used in its care.

He loves this.

It was the first truly personal thing I'd found in the house, besides perhaps the afghan on his chair. I felt that I should not put it down.

"The oldest brother carried an axe, for he was a woodcutter. The next carried a cleaver, for he sought to learn his father's trade." The words from Timber's tale rang in my mind like a bell. Was this the cleaver that the second brother, Rommel's ancestor, brought with him the night he came to kill his sister's kidnapper?

It fit.

It was just the kind of treasure the sorcerer would value. A weapon intended to kill him, the possession of a man whose life he destroyed. I imagined him smiling as he used it to chop ingredients for his curses.

Fondly, he'd remember his cruelest punishment as he sharpened the blade.

My blood boiled with red heat. The more I learned of this creature, my grandfather, the more disgusted I was. Suddenly I became terrified that he would find me here. Perhaps even now he returned, taking slow steps along the street. Hurriedly, I stole a scrap of cloth to wrap the cleaver's blade. I hoped it would not unwrap and cut through my skirt's deep pocket.

At the hidden door, I hesitated.

I'd intended to leave no evidence of my search, but Igor would surely notice his missing treasure. Perhaps, in fact, if I made a mess, it might take him longer to realize exactly what had been taken...

In the corner of the bedroom was a broom. Holding it out before me like a lance, I swept the shelves clean of their ingredients. Back and forth, back and forth, I toppled invaluable magics. High tinkling noises assaulted my ears as one after another, the glass containers shattered. I aimed for the next shelf and cleared it; I did them all.

There. It was done. Quickly I closed the door tight and replaced the broom. I raced down the stairs and I replaced the lantern on the table in the main room. I blew out its flame and watched the smoke curl from the top. I reached for the front door of the apothecary shop.

At that moment I shook with fear that he would walk in and catch me. At least I smashed his potions, I thought. He was only strong when he had magic.

A golden liquid bubbling on the nearby table mocked the thought.

I fell out through the door and into the wet winter air. I hadn't realized how scented the house was. Droplets of sweat dried on my forehead. As I took large, urgent steps away from the shop, I laughed in relief. He had not caught me.

Perhaps I'd find him still with Gran. Perhaps they ate strawberries and cream as they waited for me to cool my temper and come home to them.

"That's what family does," Gran would say, and I would not like it one bit, not one bit.

When I came to her cottage, the windows were dark. Streetlights and familiarity helped me find the latch, and when I pressed it moved for me. Unlocked.

I groped my way into the house.

Why was there no fire? Only embers glowed orange in the stone hearth. Gran usually stoked it up to burn through the night—why, tonight, would she put it out? Perhaps she left with Igor and, in anger at me, doused the fire so I would be cold when I came home. But that didn't sound anything like Gran.

Where was the lantern we kept on the table by the door? I moved slowly with my fingers splayed out. I did not want to knock it to the ground. Under my feet, I heard the crunch of cracking glass. Had I already broken the lantern? But I had not heard it fall.

There it was beneath my fingers. The glass surface was still warm, as if it had only recently been put out. I searched for the knob at the bottom and I turned it. The lantern flared to light, a yellow sliver of flame. It danced in the breeze coming in the broken window. I looked down and saw the window glass beneath my feet. It was what I had stepped on.

I felt suddenly very cold. I began to shiver, the freeze beginning in my chest, near my heart, and spreading out towards my arms and fingers and legs. The lantern shook in my hand, and I wanted to stoke up the fire so that I could put it down, but I could not stoke up the fire until I found Gran.

"Gran!" I cried into the darkness. "Gran! Grandma!"

The shape of her was not in her rocker by the fire. There was no figure draped, sleeping, under the white afghan blanket she had sewn. She was not in my chair either; I had never seen her sit in my chair.

I proceeded towards her bedroom. That's how it felt: like a procession. I took stately step after stately step, somehow unable to rush. Unable to shout and run and rip open doors. It was as if I could not move any faster or slower towards my destiny than this.

I think I knew already that she was dead. I think I knew when the breeze from the window made the lantern flame dance.

Gran was not in her room. I almost threw up when the door swung open and revealed an empty, untouched bed—from horror or relief, I don't know. I felt so sure that's where I'd find her, sleeping or gone: in her own bed, in her nightcap and white sleeping gown, one sleeve rolled up and pinned at her shoulder.

The only other room was my own.

The world spun and the door felt very far away, as if I must walk down a long tunnel in order to reach it, a corridor that kept lengthening to keep me from the truth. Was it a favor or a curse? I took a step and my brain resolved the illusion. The door was only right here. I could reach it if I put out my hand.

Suddenly I was back in the forest and I was about to drown. The water had closed over my head and I could not see the way free. I fought and thrashed and promised the universe anything if it would make it not be happening, but it was happening. Panic closed my throat and cut off my brain and my skin felt burning and freezing and prickling all at once. Any minute now it would be over—my whole world would be over—and there was no word for what I felt but terror.

I heard Timber's voice in my head, comforting in its coldness. *This is the way forward. You're either strong enough for it, or you're not.*

But this was not like that.

It is. Just open the door, Red. You have to, anyway. It's the only way forward.

There was so much red in the room. I saw that first. The floor looked like the painted village square, streaks and splatter. The door caught on something and it was Gran's nightcap, half white and half dripping bright red. Still wet.

She lay across my bed, her torso falling off the side. Upside down she stared at me, blue eyes glossy with film. Her arm hung at a twisted angle. Bloodied fingers grazed the floorboards. Across her stomach were the gashes that had made the paint on the floor. It would take a very long claw to open a stomach like that and spill the organs out on top of the nightgown. It was almost certainly what she'd died from, and not from the cluster of deep bite marks on her hip.

A sound burst from my mouth. What was it? It is hard to hear yourself when you are drowning. Was it a laugh? Yes, a laugh, that was it. A laugh at the clarity of the picture before me. I saw what I saw, and I saw what everybody else would see, and I felt insane.

A wolf killed my Gran. That's what they would say. A treacherous, vicious wolf—he must've tricked his way into the village and into Gran's cottage. Already I could see the villagers sharpening new axes.

But I knew who had killed Gran.

The bed was no longer white, except for one pillow that had fled the fight and lay untouched in the far corner of the room. Had it been a fight? Gran's eyes were open. I knew that, if she could, she would have battled back with all her power and strength. When I thought about it, I knew that she had. Gran died in agony and anger and betrayal. I decided not to think on it any longer.

I approached the bed. The floor was slippery, and the thin soles of my shoes squelched in the red. I knelt in my dress by Gran's head. I placed the lantern at my side, where it cast shadows of her organs on the white walls.

I raised my hands to Gran's shoulders, and I pushed. Her head lolled back, horribly lifeless, and I almost threw up as I shifted her fully onto the bed. I placed her head on a wet, red pillow. Her eyes were open and I tried to close them. I pressed them down but when I released my hand, they opened back up again. There was blood on her face in the shape of my fingers now. I looked at her raw stomach and could not fathom putting it back together.

My Gran was dead.

My Gran was dead.

My Grandma was dead.

She had been killed.

By him.

And now the world was crystallizing. I was coming up for air; the empty sky rushed, falling, towards my face. I gasped for breath and tasted iron. Without thinking, I stood up and I walked across the sticky floor to my dresser.

I could not feel my fingers as I unlaced my shoes and threw them aside. I took off my bloodied dress and tossed it on the floor to soak up more. Into the dresser I went, and there was the sweater Gran had only just finished knitting, lying right on top. There were my leather pants and Timber's white shirt (white and red now, from the hands that lifted it over me) and there on the back of the chair was my coat. A shoulder bag, already packed, held the treasures I meant to take back with me into the Woods. A quick glance found these things undisturbed, and I put the cleaver with them. The boots came on. I dressed as if for war.

I did not go again to Gran's body, to brush her hair from her face. I did not lean over her and cry, and remember how she used to tuck me into that bed and lull me to sleep with the deep singsong sound of her stories. I did not look at her again, for she was not my Gran. My Gran was in my memory now, and in the memory of this village. That Gran would live forever.

The man who killed her would live about five more minutes.

I closed the door to the room with the lantern still burning. I passed back through the living room one final time, and the sticky soles of my boots clung to the floor of Gran's cottage as if they did not wish for us to ever leave. They left behind red footprints. The sign that a wolf has been here, I thought with giddy insanity. But he was not a wolf. He was a beast much worse than that.

Ready and waiting for me beside the door was Gran's axe.

I picked up Gran's axe.

36

SINCE THE DAY I could walk, I walked the streets of the village. A hundred thousand times I'd closed the door to Grandma's house and turned right to walk towards the square. I'd passed Marta's house on the end of the next street. I'd passed the butcher's, the baker's. Sometimes it was cold, and I pulled my jacket up around my neck and I wished the walk to be over. Sometimes I would throw back my head and breathe in the smell of the leaves that fell from the trees in Woods I could only imagine. Sometimes I would cease to pay attention to my path at all, lulled into distraction by the familiar. It was the oldest place in the world to me, this path from Grandma's house to the center of Big Village.

But never—*never*—had I walked it in such a haze of rage. My vision blurred with unshed tears and fury. I took the turns automatically, almost running, almost slipping on the snow-coated stones. Gran's axe dangled in my hand. If I slowed down, my blood might boil me alive from the inside. I walked the path to the apothecary's tower.

I banged upon the door with the wooden end of the axe. I held it up, ready to strike him down as soon as he answered, and people who passed me on the street looked oddly at me and I didn't care. I was going to kill him, this yellow-eyed sorcerer. For I had not a doubt in my mind that it was he who killed Gran. The true wolf within the village walls was him. And Gran herself had let him in.

The door opened slowly, and from the dark emerged the shape of the old man. His eyes shined like lights in the darkness, and I did not swing my axe to strike him down. Still I held it poised and ready above my head, and I thought that I might swing and strike at any moment. But I had never killed a man.

“Red. Do come in.” His voice was oil and composure. As the door closed behind me, I thought about those four brothers who once entered

here and were never the same. The glow of the simmering potions on the table cast an eerie light. He had only one candle lit. “Can I get you a drink?”

My voice wouldn’t come. It would come to scream—had I wished to do that, I could’ve done so easily. But at the forming of words, it struggled. I opened my mouth and closed it. Anger was a thick, swollen mass in my throat. My whole body vibrated with it.

To scream. To swing an axe. These things were natural to me now, and not the civilized act of speaking. But the yellow-eyed man was civilization incarnate. The opposite of the wild, his buttons done up tight.

“You can tell me why you killed my Gran.” It came out hoarse. As if I’d been crying since I found her. I hadn’t shed a tear.

“Ah yes, but I’m afraid that’s your fault, Red. You see, you told her the truth about me. About the wolves.”

“She didn’t even believe me.”

“No, no, not yet. But she would have, eventually. Because it’s true.” He fixed me with a stare, and there was a small smile on his lips.

“You killed my Gran.”

“No, no, Red. See, we’ve already established. You did that. You chose the wolves over your Gran. You put her at risk to try to save them.”

“Put her at risk?!” My head was spinning. His words made no sense, yet in my haze they confused me. I *had* chosen the wolves—my wolf, Timber—over the village. I’d kept my mission, and the location of the pack’s lair, secret even from Gran. For a moment I wondered if he was right, and I’d betrayed my kind.

Then, like a flood, clarity swept through me. The cobwebs of grief were cleared from my mind, and I stared at this man—no, this *beast*—with a granddaughter’s perfect fury. I advanced.

“*You* created the wolves. *You* set them on the village. Gran was sent into the Woods because of you. She grew to hate wolves because of you. She taught all of us to hate and fear because of you. She embraced this war to kill *your* enemies. And *you* killed her.”

I was above him now, for he’d seated himself in the rocker as if he had no worries over what I might do. I stood over him and held my axe high.

“Are you going to kill me, Red? Your own grandfather?” His eyes flashed and his teeth showed their points as he smiled once again. “How marvelous. You have it in you after all.”

“Have what?”

“Why, me.” Suddenly he was standing, so swift I stumbled back. I regained my footing and kept my hold on my axe strong. Into my mind flashed the stories of him, of how dangerous he was. Of what he did to people with potions just like those around me. “Yes, I think you have it in you after all.”

“Have what?” I asked again, for I did not understand.

He gestured wide to the strange things in the room. “Magic.”

I shook my head. “I don’t.”

“You do, girl. You do.” He shook a fist. “You have **the conviction.**”

He was confusing me again. All I wanted was my clarity back so I could swing my axe. *This is what he does*, I thought. He gets you talking. He casts his illusions. He makes you think he’s something other than he is. He manipulates, until he gets other people to do what he wants.

What did I want? I considered. I wanted to kill him. I wanted the tooth that Selma still needed to destroy his curse...but something more. I wanted to know why he’d killed Gran. Really know. Before I swung my axe to avenge my Gran, I needed to understand why she’d died. So I was going to make him tell me.

I fixed him with a stare. “Tell me why you killed my Gran.”

To my horror, he threw back his head and laughed. “See, there it is! There it is! The magic. The conviction. I can’t not tell you now, can I? It’s glorious. It seems I’ve kept something of my own from the wolves after all.”

I waited. His words made little sense to me, but I felt that if I simply waited, he would tell me.

“I killed your Gran because her loyalty to you was stronger than it was to me. You are going back to the wolves, and she would’ve followed. There the truth would be, to see with her own eyes, and eventually she would’ve believed. And she would not have fought my war any longer. In fact, knowing your Gran, she might’ve come for me herself.” For a moment, his expression was one of wistful admiration, as if he’d thought highly of her after all, this woman he’d just murdered. Then he stepped forward, and his eyes were fervent with an insane man’s dedication. “But see, I intend to end this war. To kill all the wolves in the Woods. I bound them in fear; now I’ll bind them in death. And your Gran was in my way.”

“Bound them in fear?”

He smiled, and he reached absently for his chest. His fingers pressed against his coat, feeling for the outline of something beneath.

That's it, I thought. He's still wearing it.

"It was the curse, all those years ago. Become what you most fear. Perfect, isn't it? Except that I didn't realize..." he trailed off.

I had to know what was under his coat. It *must* be the tooth that Selma needed. Why else would he finger it as he remembered casting the curse?

I would get it, and then I would kill him. It was time for that; the time for talking was over. I could feel it heavy in the air. When had I learned to feel such a thing? It hardly mattered.

I hefted my axe. I was Grandma's child. And I owed her vengeance. I would get it for her, for all the generations of wolves, all the sacrificed girls, all the lost Huntsmen. But mostly, for Gran.

"What's on your necklace?" I asked quietly, but I didn't really expect him to answer. His eyes answered for him, the way they became round and blinked.

The air was charged. Electric. Lightning was about to strike and then the world would change. We hovered on a precipice, about to fall over the edge. As if in slow motion, I saw him begin to move. His ancient freckled hand, pale and folded over with wrinkles, reached out through the air towards his table. At the end of its path, a liquid bubbled like molten gold.

I moved too. I raised the axe above my head and I brought it down hard at the place his hand reached for. A thump sounded as it landed solid in the thick wooden table. With a tremendous cry, I pulled at the handle to bring the blade back up out of the table. The table came with it, pulling up and cracking along the schism I'd made. Vials fell to the floor and shattered. The golden liquid tipped and spilled its contents onto his reaching hand before the cauldron hit the floor and splattered what was left. On my calf, I felt a sudden sharp spot of pain—burning.

In that moment, he screamed, and he clutched at his hand, and he fell to his knees. On the surface of his hand, the golden liquid crawled and burrowed. It was as if it was alive, a bubbling liquid creature. I saw it was eating him from the outside in, and I knew that this was in fact what he'd been reaching for. He'd meant to throw it at me and watch it eat my face.

My grandfather's face was a mask of agony. His wrinkles folded in on themselves as he scrunched up his eyes and mouth against the torture. I bent beside him and pretended compassion.

“What stops it?” I asked, for I could already feel the tiny splatter on my leg burrowing deeper and deeper below my leather pants. Could it crawl through muscle and punch holes in bone? How long before it lost its power? I didn’t know the answers and I didn’t want to learn them.

The apothecary raised a shaking hand and pointed. A glass vial had fallen from the cracked table and shattered. Already its blue liquid was soaking into the wooden floorboards; the container was nothing but shards around it. Nearby there was a dropper, still intact.

Axe in hand, I walked over to the blue liquid and used the dropper to take up a small amount that had congregated along the edge of two uneven boards. Bending over my leg, I dropped the magic liquid into the hole in my pant leg. Instantly, I felt the burning feeling subside, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“You told me the truth. That’s nice,” I said as I stood. In the corner was a basin full of water. I walked to it, picked it up, and threw the entire contents onto the floor, washing away the last of the lingering blue potion. There was no more upstairs; I’d already smashed all those.

“No!” the apothecary cried, and he reached out his ruined hand and watched in agony as the restorative diluted to nothing. On the back of his hand, the thick golden liquid was disappearing. Perhaps it had entered those holes that were making a Swiss cheese of his skin—a red, raw cheese. It was grotesque to watch, and yet I felt a thrill and happiness at the sight of it. I thought I might pull up a chair and just sit here and watch as the acid ate him alive. I would tell stories of Gran, maybe, to remind him of her every minute.

“It has you now,” the ruined man said from his spot on the floor. “The vengeance. Ah, my granddaughter. I’ve left something behind after all.”

At that, I found a new coldness. I approached him and bent down, my fingers rough on the back of his neck. There it was, just as I expected beneath his collar: the leather cord of a necklace. I yanked it hard enough to break and lifted it away. At the end, wrapped tightly inside the cord, was a single large tooth, the remains of a creature long dead. It had turned black in all the time that had passed, or perhaps it had been black to start with.

“Thank you,” I said cordially, as one of his fingers fell off of him, its joints eaten out and gone. It thudded to join the hissing potions on the floor. “Tell me how to break the curse.”

He laughed weakly and said nothing.

“Tell me how to break the curse.” Every word was a blade of ice. For there was always, in the back of my mind, the fear that I would get these things back to Selma and she would not be able to do it. If there was anything we were missing, anything Selma may have overlooked, this was the last moment to learn of it.

“You don’t need me to tell you,” the old man said. He had fallen all the way down now, and lay on the floor with his hand raised above him. He clutched it in his other one as it fell apart like an old log turned to ash. “You already have everything you need.”

Then it was time to go.

Soon, some Huntsman might find Gran. They would report her to the apothecary and find him too. Then they would raise the alarm and I’d never get out. I needed to leave.

But the thought of leaving her body behind to be found...I finally started to cry. Tears leaked down my cheeks and fell to mingle with the watery magics that glistened around the soles of my boots.

She was dead. My Gran was really dead. Never again would I see her smiling face, or her ferocious one. Never would those wrinkles contort around the scar that crossed her cheek. I had heard her last tale told; I had eaten her last meal with her. She had fought her last battle, and now her fights were done. I let the tears fall down my cheeks. My face reddened and I stood there, silent, as if in vigil. I knew that the next step was to leave her and her village behind. To take my own path through the Woods and leave forever the path she had meant for me.

“Goodbye Gran,” I whispered. But it was not really goodbye. I could not really say goodbye and leave her behind. I knew I would not say goodbye for a long time. I would carry her with me, as constant a presence as her red coat around my shoulders.

Beneath me, a black hole burned in the skin of the sorcerer’s arm. Inside I saw the white of bone and the gold of magic. How long before his arm fell off to join the collection of fingers on the floor? The golden liquid was in him now, and it would spread. I did not need my axe bloodied; I had done what I’d come to do. Perhaps it was good to leave it looking like an accident. Or, even better...

One more swing of my axe and I buried the blade in the floorboards beside his head.

“There’s your mercy, grandfather.”

Whoever found him would say that he loved Gran so much, he took his own life after he found her dead. They'd hate the wolves more than ever, but there was nothing I could do about that now. Perhaps if they did not suspect murder, it would be easier for me to get out.

Clutching the string of leather in my hand, I turned my back on the murderer and I walked away. I walked straight to Flora and I saddled her up. I had no axe, I had no supplies. I had only my red coat and my leathers and my Flora, and the three things I'd come back to find. A symbol burnt into an old plank of wood, a cleaver, and a tooth. Lying beside these treasures in my pack was one more: a drawing done of me and Gran and my mom, when I was a little girl.

Flora's hooves cracked against the cobblestones. I rode her hard, not worried about drawing attention. Soon the village would wake, and I would be gone. But I stopped short of the gate. I snuck closer on quiet feet to observe the guards on duty. Ah, some luck. It was Marta's new boyfriend, Dylan. With him was a young guy—a new recruit, by the look of it. I slipped back to Flora and rode to Marta's house.

I knocked hard on her door and I heard the commotion of sudden waking, when lights are felt for in the dark and slippers are donned against the cold floor, and people whose eyes are not really open stumble forward with their arms reached out. It was Marta herself who opened the door and blinked into the dark.

"Marta."

"Red?"

"I need your help."

"Red, it's the middle of the night. What's going on? Are you alright?"

"No. Gran is dead. She was killed by the yellow-eyed man, although he made it look like a wolf attack." I heard the sound of these words leaving my mouth and they were dead and even, like a teacher reading a textbook. I reached out and grabbed Marta by the shoulders. She jumped and gasped. I realized she could barely see me in the dim light; my eyes had adjusted, but hers were still crusted with sleep. "Marta, it is really important that you believe me. Everybody is going to say that the wolves killed Gran, but it was the apothecary. My grandfather."

"He's your grandfather?!" She asked this with the indignant voice of a best friend who has not been properly informed. But there was no time, and now there never would be.

“Marta, I need a favor. A big one. Please. It’s the last thing I’ll ever ask of you.”

Now worry creased her forehead, and she came forward towards me, peering to see the expression on my face. “Red,” she said softly. “Are you okay?”

“Of course I’m not,” and now my voice caught. Tears came down my cheeks again, appearing suddenly as if dropped there from the apothecary’s little device. “Of course not, Gran is dead.”

Marta threw her arms around me and we hugged in the doorway as cold air blew into her house to threaten the hearth fire.

“What do you need?”

“Dylan is working the gate with a new recruit. I need you to distract them, get them away from it.”

Marta held my shoulders, her warm hands steady. I saw understanding, and then sadness, and then acceptance cross her pretty face. “So that you can go back into the Woods?”

I nodded.

“Will you ever come back?”

I almost shook my head no, and then hesitated. “I’m not sure.”

Marta’s face hardened with determination, as if this was her battle, right here. Giving up her best friend to the Woods she hated so much.

“It’s right for you, Red. I could see that as clear as you could see it was wrong for me.” She glanced at the fire and smiled softly. “God, I’m so grateful to be back. Timber...”

I waited.

“He’s why you’re going back, isn’t he?”

I almost said no, no, definitely not. I was going back to break the curse. I was going back to defeat the legacy of the man who killed Gran. I was going back because the danger and adventure of the Woods made me feel so *alive*. And those things were true. But also...

“Yes. Yes, I’m going back for him.” Because that was true too. The truest thing was this: I was going back into the Woods to be the woman the Woods made me. I was going back to do what I knew was right. But I’d only become that woman, and known that rightness, because of Timber. He made me into the woman I was now, and I felt suddenly sure that, if he were gone, I would still go into the Woods tonight. But I wasn’t sure I’d stay.

“Goodbye, Marta,” I said, for even though we would ride to the wall together on Flora’s back, this last moment alone was our real goodbye. Right here and now. Best friends forever.

We reached for each other and squeezed each other half-breathless in a hug that lasted eons. When I came out of it, I was crying again, and it was Marta’s soft face that was solid and dry, even determined.

“Let’s do this,” she said. “I have to change.” She disappeared inside and reappeared more quickly than I could have hoped for looking fabulous, as if she’d been up and out all night drinking and just happened to be walking past the gate on her way home. She even took a swig of red wine from a bottle that sat uncleared on her dinner table. Her breath would smell like The Rusty Axeman now, and I smiled in gratitude at her cleverness. Then I pulled her behind me on Flora and we charged back towards the wall.

I stopped before we could be seen, and Marta slid down. She went towards the gate with a slight weave in her step, heading from the direction of the bars.

“Dylan!” she called when she got close. She broke into a grin and then a stumbling run. The Huntsman jumped up from his seat and rushed to greet her. Catch her, too, for she swerved and acted like she might fall. Her mighty prince came to her aid and held her steady as she breathed her wine breath in his face.

I could not hear the quiet words exchanged between them, but it was clear enough when she held her mouth and acted as if she might barf, and ran off as far from the gate as she could to lean against the wall and heave. Concerned, of course, Dylan followed her.

“No, no, don’t follow me!” she said loudly, and she ran further from the gate. Of course, he followed, and now they were disappearing into the darkness and they were passing around the curve of the wall and a building was blocking them from my sight and she was gone.

“Goodbye,” I whispered.

The other guard did not know what to do. At first, he’d taken steps to follow, but then he hesitated, glancing nervously at the gate that was his charge. It was his instinct to rush after the lady in distress, but his recent training had taught him that duty came first. I tied Flora and approached on foot, trying to look drunk myself. I did not have to try very hard; the boy looked positively delighted to find another lady in distress wandering the streets.

"Excuse me," I said thickly. "My friend Marta came by here. Did you see her?"

"She went that way." He pointed in the correct direction, and I nearly fell over.

He rushed forward to help me, and I leaned back in his arms. "Can you help me find her?"

He frowned, his face tortured by his split loyalties. "I have to guard the gate."

"Okay then," I said in my normal voice, and I landed a punch on his jaw hard enough to knock him to the ground. He wasn't out though, only down, and caught in the trap of his own surprise. As he tried to recover his wits and his feet, I reached down and swiped the axe from his belt. I pointed the sharp end at him and the blood left his face. He had never been trained for this. "Open the gate please. Right now."

Gulping, the boy ran to shift the heavy iron bars that held the gate closed. I was surprised he had the muscles to move them, and to turn the winch that would slowly pull the chain to open the doors. It seemed not to occur to him that I might have wolves waiting on the other side. To him I was only a drunk girl with a mean right hook who fancied a night stroll under the moon. I was grateful for his naivety.

As the gate rumbled open, I remounted Flora and brought her close. Just as I reached the wood and iron, I heard a bell toll. Another took up its cry, and the boy abandoned the winch to run to his bell and ring it.

Feet pounded in the street behind me. Men were coming to reinforce the gate. They shouted: "She's dead! Gran is dead! There's a wolf inside the wall!"

Soon they'd find the apothecary too, and all hell would break loose.

As I thought of the panic, I felt a strange gratitude. I was not leaving Gran alone; she'd been found. She'd be with her people now.

"Goodbye," I whispered one last time. To Marta. To Gran. To my whole life and my old self.

And then I stepped back into the Woods. Ahead, the trees cast their queer shadows on the white ground. Wind buffeted my cheek, air to blast me clean. I felt something ease in me and I smiled. Tears came once more—happiness or sadness, I didn't know.

I was home again. The home I'd chosen. The only home I had left.

37

I FOLLOWED THE Huntsmen's road. It was wide and flat, and I moved quickly along its packed surface. To either side, a thin layer of snow coated branches and obscured fallen leaves. Winter had come to the Woods.

I knew the normal sounds of night and I ignored most of them on instinct. My ears were alert only for those sounds that meant danger. The gate creaking open to send out Huntsmen. The cackling laugh of a nearby predator.

Hours passed as I followed the road. I did not have a destination. I'd never find Grandmother's House on my own, and I had no idea where Timber was. I expected him to find me. During my days in the village, I'd imagined he was close, waiting for me just on the other side of the iron thorns.

There was nothing to do but ride and think. My thoughts were of Gran; I tried to redirect them, but over and over, they turned back. The relief on her face when I stumbled from Timber's cave. The rhythmic creaking movement of her rocker. Her knitting needles clicking softly, adding percussion to the sound of her deep voice telling stories. Her blue eyes glossy with emptiness.

Her loss was a massive needle piercing my ribs. As I rode and remembered, the needle twisted and dug its way deeper into my chest.

Killing her murderer hadn't purged my agony. It had only robbed me of the purposefulness that overtook me when I found her body. There was nothing more to do now but ride on. I welcomed the exhaustion that descended as the hours passed by. The memories stopped and there was nothing but riding and the sharp carving of the needle. My mind stopped every function but listening. I was a statue on the back of a horse.

Then, a branch cracked. Snow creaked, compressed by a pair of boots. "Come out!" I shouted. My axe was in my right hand. My eyes roved over

the darkened land like a spotlight.

A shape emerged from the trees. A black shadow with no eyes, but I knew it was him. Timber. I could see the shape of his wavy hair, and the bulk of his shoulders, and the light way he moved. I known all along he'd find me. Timber never let me down.

It was strange for joy to pierce my chest even as the needle of grief turned and burrowed. I dismounted and ran to him. I threw myself into his arms and he lifted me off the ground. He breathed deep of the scent of my blood-touched hair.

“Timber,” I said into his shoulder.

And then he was kissing me, his cheeks rough and unshaven, scraping my face. I met him with equal hunger and we stood entwined as if we never meant to break apart again.

But then we did. Our lips did, at least, while our arms remained wrapped around each other like a set of clasps. I looked into his eyes, full of cleverness and compassion.

Suddenly the needle pulled out from my chest, and from the hole it left began to pour all the emotions I'd kept contained. My throat made a strange gulping sound, and I grabbed at Timber's shirt and squeezed my fists tight.

His expression transformed into one of worry and fear. “Red...”

The dam holding back my tears shattered. I fell into him like a crumbling statue, parts of me breaking off and collapsing. Through the snot that ran out my nose and the gasping sobs that left my mouth, I told him.

“My Gran is dead. The apothecary came back to the village. He wanted a war to end the wolves for good. Gran was going to work with him, but then I told her the truth about who he was, and he killed her.”

“Oh, Red,” Timber murmured. His fingers brushed tears off my cheeks, but he was distracted. Worry etched a frown with bold lines. “The sorcerer has returned...he must've killed her to take command in her place.”

I was already shaking my head. “He already had command. She just gave it up to him when he appeared at the gate. He was my grandfather, Timber. She trusted him.” I watched for Timber’s reaction. I remembered wondering, in the moment I learned of my lineage, whether Timber had already known.

He blinked and looked away. Still his fingers were brushing at the side of my cheek.

“So you did know,” I said. My words were soft and sharp, and the thought appeared, unbidden, that there was no one left in the world that I could trust.

“I did.”

“You all did. It’s why Rommel tried to rape me. It’s why the Alpha wanted me so much. The wolves take the blood of the sorcerer out of the village and into the Woods. That’s the tradition.”

I needed him to confirm it, and he did with a stiff nod.

Returning in force was a feeling I’d only recently put to sleep. Rage. I was out of his arms. My tears were drying in the cold winter wind. “Why would you keep that from me?”

“Would it have been digestible for you, given everything you were going through?” He waited for me to lie and say yes. His expression was compassion and confidence. Nowhere was there apology.

I swallowed and said nothing.

His voice softened. “Red, if I knew he would return, I certainly would have told you. I had no idea it would ever matter.”

“Of course it matters. It’s a part of who I am. It’s part of who Gran was, and my mom. How could you not tell me?” I didn’t say that what hurt the most was that he’d known something about Gran that I had never known, and now I felt that I had spent most of my life not really knowing her, and there would never be more time.

Timber walked away from me. He pressed his back against a nearby tree. When he spoke I knew that he’d sensed my unspoken thoughts, as he so often did. “Perhaps they loved each other because your Gran was a match for the sorcerer’s power. Not through any magic, but through her strength and character. Did she tell you the story of how they met?”

I stayed silent. She had, but I did not wish to stop him.

“It was before my time, of course. My father told me the tale.” His voice was low and even. It drew me to the tree, where I leaned beside him. He did not move, only looked ahead into the forest.

“Your Gran was about your age when she was chosen as a sacrifice and left outside the wall. The fates of the girls back then varied. Some were quickly raped and murdered. Many died of exposure before anything much could happen to them. Some were rescued and brought to Grandmother’s House. Some were seduced by wolves and became their mates. None survived on their own in the Woods.

“That was before your Gran. It’s said that on her first day in the Woods, she found a dead Huntsman and took his axe. That very night, a man came to her to commit violence, and she hid from him. The sun rose as he searched for her, and she watched him become a wolf. They say she fought him in single combat and killed him, but I don’t know if that part is true.”

“It is,” I murmured, remembering the version Gran told. Having heard the story did not reduce my wish to hear it again now. I drank in every image he painted of my Gran as a young, unmarked girl, going through a trial so similar to mine. I felt that with every word, Timber gave a piece of my Gran back to me somehow.

“She learned to survive. She hunted, gathered, fought, hid, built shelter, and became as adept a woodsman as those who’ve lived here all their lives. She had a gift for battle, see, and a resilience unlike any seen before in a human. Every wolf who attacked her was never seen again. Soon they learned not to attack, and she was mostly left alone. Then one day, when she’d been in the Woods some months, a few young wolves got it into their heads to attack her together. She was a scourge on the free Woods, they said. It brought shame to the pack to have a girl, intended as sacrifice, living freely right under their noses, and unable to be tamed or killed.

“They say there were three of them, and your Gran felled them all. Nobody knows how she did it--only that she earned the scar on her face. But the wound became infected. Wolves, your Gran could fight, but infection...”

I could see the scar I knew so well, still open and throbbing. Veins of red running from it to bisect her face. She could feel herself weakening. She would not be strong enough to fight when they came again. She must’ve felt so alone.

“That’s when the apothecary came to her. They say he walked right up to her in the daylight, and that’s how she knew he was not a wolf.”

“She told me she tied him to a tree for two days and a night to see if he’d change.”

Timber nodded. “When he didn’t, she untied him and he treated her infection. He had spoken to her with sweet, magic words, and when he cured her too she couldn’t help but love him. For months, they walked the Woods together, and the wolves did not dare come near.

“Then one day he was gone. Her year was up soon after that, and your Gran returned to the village. The wolves breathed easier. She was the

strongest, bravest woman we'd ever seen."

Hearing these words, I felt that I had known Gran after all. Not the specifics of her stories, but the woman herself. The bravest woman ever seen.

"She was the bravest woman we'd ever seen," Timber went on, "until I saw you."

I rolled my eyes. What a line from the man who'd so often made me see my own cowardice.

"Your Gran was a fighter and a survivor. But she was never brave enough to see the truth. She let the apothecary into her heart, and into the village. She let her hatred of the wolves blind her, and you didn't. You were brave enough to see past it, and to believe in the truth even when you realized that the evil man at the heart of the tale was your own grandfather. I'm sorry I did not expect that much from you. I should've known better, and told you the truth myself."

With these words, Timber stoked life back into feelings gone cold. I felt proud of who I was again; I felt safe in his arms again. I leaned my head on top of his shoulder.

"Did you get the artifacts for Selma's spell?"

"All three."

"Good girl. I got a message from Selma. She didn't want to wait for us to make the journey back to her, so she followed shortly after us. She's at a cottage only a day's ride away."

"Oh." I felt disappointed. I'd looked forward to the long nights of traveling together.

But Timber said: "I'm relieved. The Huntsmen have increased their activity since they found you. The Alpha's scouts and spies, and even Sampson, can't find out the details of their plans. We expect them to pour out of the gate en masse any day. We must break the spell before they do."

I shook my head. "No, Timber, they *were* preparing for an attack. A massive one—the full force of the village brought into the Woods to end the wolves once and for all. It was the apothecary's plan. But now they have no leadership. Even if they want to attack—which they probably do, for he staged Gran's death to look like a wolf did it—they can't."

Timber was frowning. "Red, the apothecary—"

I realized I hadn't told him. I began to laugh. Timber froze, almost afraid of the strange sound.

“The apothecary is dead too.” I spit the words with cocky pride and hatred. “I killed him after he killed Gran.”

Timber was silent. His breathing was shallow as if we were making love. I could tell he did not entirely believe it. “Tell me.”

My voice was a hard-edged sword. “I took Gran’s axe. I went to his door. I took the tooth from around his neck and I made him admit he killed Gran. He tried to throw a potion on me but I spilled it on him instead. It was like acid, Timber, it ate away his hand. I left him in agony, with my axe to kill himself with.”

Through my story, Timber body was tense next to mine. But at the last words I uttered, he went loose and sighed. *He is relaxed*, I thought. *His enemy is dead and it's finally almost over.*

“You didn’t kill him,” he said quietly.

“What?”

“Red, you didn’t kill him. He was still alive when you left.”

“Yes, but—”

He shook his head. “You didn’t kill him.”

Vengeance descended on me like a heavy black bird settling on my shoulders. It weighed me down and made the air taste wrong. My voice sounded strange. “No, I killed him.”

Timber took my hand and squeezed. Was that pity in his eyes?

I stood up off the tree. I let him go. “You don’t know. You weren’t there.”

“I know the sorcerer. I know the tales of what he’s survived before. If he was still alive when you left him, we must assume he found a way to stay that way. I’m sorry, Red. I hope I’m wrong. You wanted to avenge your Gran—”

“You don’t know anything!” I was crying and my voice was too loud. “You didn’t know her! She wasn’t your Gran. She—she—” I fell to the ground. My fingernails scraped the dirt beneath the snow. I gasped in breath after breath. Arms came around behind me and held me strong. I buried my head in the wet ground and I sobbed. As the tears escaped, they left behind a hard rock in the place where my heart used to be.

I had not killed the man who killed Gran.

It has you now. The vengeance.

Yes, it did. It was all I was.

But Selma could still break the curse. We would destroy my grandfather's work, and then I would destroy him.

The sobbing stopped and I looked up at Timber with cold eyes. "Let's get to her. Now, tonight. Let's end this."

Timber nodded and helped me stand. But what was that behind his eyes?

38

SELMA LAUNCHED HERSELF out the open cabin door as if she'd stood waiting in its frame for days, watching for our arrival. She stepped lightly on the snow, her slippers barely breaking its surface. She held up her skirts to keep them dry and squinted from the reflection of bright sunlight on white ground.

It was early afternoon, and Timber was a wolf. Selma greeted him with a quick fluff of his grey fur, and then turned her attention to me.

"What did you get?"

"All of it. All three things."

Selma practically squealed. Her greedy eyes found my shoulder bag, and her fingers twitched with desire to snatch it off me and throw it open. Feeling proud and important, and nearly as eager as she was, I lifted it off and handed it to her. Her fingers fluttered on the ties and she threw it open.

"Careful," I warned, thinking of the cleaver.

She pulled it out first, letting its wrapping fall to the ground.

"I found it in the sorcerer's cottage. He's been using it to chop ingredients for his potions. And I thought that maybe—"

"It belonged to the second brother, who followed in his father's footsteps and became a butcher."

"Yes."

Selma nodded.

"Can you sense if that's right?" I asked her.

She frowned at the cleaver and slowly shook her head.

"No, I can't sense anything. But it makes sense. It's good. What else?"

She dug in the pack and removed the piece of wood. Her fingers traced the symbol burnt into its surface. "I've seen it before. Some of the wolves wear it as a tattoo. What is it?"

“I think the wolves that wear it come from the third brother’s line. I found this in the old quarter, near where the butcher and his family used to live. Their house is gone now, but maybe this was scavenged from it. Plus...” I tapered off.

Selma looked at me sharply. “What? Plus what?”

“Plus it just felt right.”

Did it feel right to her too? I wanted her to say yes. At this very moment, her finger traced the blackened lines. But she said nothing and felt in the pack for more things. She pulled out the drawing I’d brought of my family.

“Oh! That’s mine—” With rude haste, I lunged forward and snatched it from her hands. I felt my face burning at the sentimentality I’d meant to keep private. Then I caught sight of the drawing—of Gran’s smiling face, scarred but still young—and tears welled up in my eyes.

Timber saw, and nuzzled me. Selma watched with curiosity, but she did not ask me anything. Instead, more timidly this time, she reached her hand back into the pack and felt around.

“Oh, it’s here,” I said. I pulled the black tooth from my pocket and held it up. It still hung from its broken leather cord.

“Oh, Red, yes,” Selma said breathlessly. Her cheeks were red with excitement. She’d been working to break the curse since she was eleven years old. Now her moment was here. She reached forward and took the tooth gingerly from my hand. I almost didn’t want to let it go.

“Can you do it?”

“Oh yes.” Her voice was reverent and almost incredulous. “I can do it right now.”

I looked over at my wolf. Even sitting down, he towered over me. This spell would change his life; it would alter his body and his identity and his future.

Are you ready? I asked with my eyes.

Ready or not.

I should’ve expected that answer. Timber had never sought to break the curse for himself. He did it for all of us, for the bigger picture.

“Let’s do it then. How do we start?”

“I brewed the base for the potion before I left home. I need to add the tooth and boil it for a few more hours. I’ll use the artifacts from the brothers in the ritual.”

“Can you do it before dark?”

“Yes.” We both looked at Timber. We would know it worked if he changed.

Selma and I went into the cottage, leaving Timber outside. This cabin had not been designed to admit wolves, and he was too large to fit through the doorway.

I coughed on the thick air indoors. It was heavy with moisture and fumes from boiling potions. Herbs dried in clumps from the rafters above me. So quickly, Selma had made this place her home. Yet the smells did not bring me back to Selma’s cozy kitchen in Grandmother’s House; instead I was in the sorcerer’s shop, smelling the sweet scent of his bubbling magics. Had Selma ever brewed molten acid that burrowed through skin? No. She wasn’t like that.

“Selma,” I said. “When I was in the village, I met the sorcerer. He came back, and I met him.”

She dangled the tooth above her potion, about to drop it in. “What?! He’s still alive?!”

I didn’t know how to answer that. “Anyway, he told me what he said to cast his curse. He told the brothers to become what they most feared. That was the curse, those are the words he said. I thought that might be important.”

Selma considered. She gave great thought to the matter as the tooth swung like a pendulum in her hand. As moments inched by, I became worried.

She didn’t know.

Finally, she seemed to decide, and confidence flooded back into her. “No, no, I don’t think it is. You know, I thought for a long time about the words. But I decided in the end they don’t matter to breaking the curse. What matters is the ingredients and the potion. That’s how I do my magic; it’s not with words.”

I nodded. I had no choice but to believe her. And yet a part of me still worried. *They are the only thing that matters*, that part whispered. But there was nothing to do but trust Selma to know better than me.

She dropped the tooth into the chunky soup of her potion. Instantly, it turned from bright green to grey, as if the darkness of the tooth were seeping out.

“Now we just boil it for awhile.” She took a seat at her table. “So you met him. Tell me everything.”

I did not know where to begin. “Well, he’s my grandfather. Apparently when she was young, Gran was cast out into the Woods and she met him. She fell in love with him and was pregnant with my mom when she went back to the village.”

Guilt stole over Selma’s face. “I know. I knew as soon as Timber told me you were Gran’s granddaughter. Everybody in the Woods knows who fathered her child.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I said fiercely.

“It seemed like not my truth to tell. I thought it might mean you could do magic, though. I thought of training you. But Timber said you didn’t have powers like that, so I left it alone.”

Suddenly I remembered the two of them whispering outside in the dark, Timber saying ‘no’ over and over.

“Wait, was that what you two were whispering about the night before we left Grandmother’s House? I woke up and I saw you. He kept saying no.”

“Oh, yeah, that was that. I was thinking of sending you home with some charms to help you find the artifacts more easily. But without magic, you couldn’t have used them, and he seemed sure you’re normal...” Her words drifted off and silence lingered.

I thought of telling her more about the hot, tingling in my fingers when I touched the branded wood, and the feeling I felt in that moment that it was *right*. But I did not actually believe I could do magic, and so it seemed silly to try to convince Selma I could.

“So he’s still alive? And back in the village. No wonder they want war.”

“I’m not sure he’s still alive.” I told Selma how he’d killed Gran and made it look like a wolf. How I’d gone to his house to kill him with my axe, but watched his own potion eat his arm instead. “Timber says I didn’t kill him; he thinks he’s not dead. But I watched his fingers fall off. I watched him in agony, being eaten alive. How could he not be dead?”

I looked to Selma, hoping her opinion might offer a new perspective, but she only stood up and came to me with her arms wide open. She pressed her tall body against me in a hug that promised I still had family after all. She squeezed me until I thought I might stop breathing, trying to press love

into me with her muscles. “Oh Red, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry; I know how close you were with your Gran.”

I barely heard her. I was back there again, in the room with Gran’s body. I saw her open eyes and open mouth. Red staining her white dress. Big gashes and deep punctures. I wondered what he used to make them, and at that thought I felt sick, and I wished I had buried my axe in his neck after all.

“I’ve read about that potion,” she said. “It keeps traveling until there’s nothing left of the body, not even bones.” She shuddered. “Never for a second have I considered brewing some.”

Her words sent a thrill through me. Perhaps I’d avenged Gran after all. Perhaps soon, even the legacy of his curse would cease to be.

39

IT WAS PREDUSK, that time when the sky goes grey and the wind reminds you to gather kindling for a fire. The sun burrows into your eyes, its shape changing as it hides behind the tallest points of pine. Selma's potion was ready, and Timber would remain a wolf long enough for us to know if her spell worked. It was time.

Together, we carried her table outside. Selma laid the artifacts reverently on its surface. The ancient axe, rusted and chipped. The cleaver, polished and well-cared for. The symbol of a tree burnt into old wood. And the ring, made with love by the youngest brother. Wood and steel, these were the things the brothers loved, the things they put their blood into. Beside these things Selma placed another knife—a thick curved hunting dagger. Then she disappeared back inside the cabin and returned carrying her potion. Mittens protected her hands from the hot cast iron. I could not see the tooth; it must still be in the potion, resting on the bottom, its magic leaching out.

Selma placed the cauldron on the table and took a deep breath. She looked at neither of us, so Timber and I looked at each other. What was he feeling? Hope or fear? Eagerness or sadness? All I saw was an unreadable blankness. I put my hand on his back and buried it deep in his fur so it touched his skin. My fingers scratched lightly, without attention. All our attention was on the tall, regal woman with the blood of the sorcerer in her veins.

I wondered what her magic would look like. I'd never seen a spell cast. Had the sorcerer used a spell to rip Gran's body apart?

I shuddered, and Timber noticed and looked sidelong at me. *You okay?*

I nodded stiffly, but in actuality I felt unsure. I would know by the time the sun went down. There was no future until Selma's spell was cast.

Selma stood before the table with her arms held out from her body, palms open. Her eyes were closed and her chin tilted to the sky. She might fall backwards if she were not holding herself so tight, every muscle vibrating with the effort of stillness. Was she saying a prayer? Or perhaps she'd already started mouthing the words she'd chosen to break the curse. For a moment I worried she would say everything silently and I would never get to hear the words that broke the spell.

Then she moved, reaching a single arm forward to lift the ladle she'd laid beside the cauldron. Every part of her body was frozen but that arm, which dipped with infinite slowness into the chunky liquid moss, which was no longer boiling. Stiffly, slowly, she moved the ladle until it hovered over the rusty axe. I watched the edge of the spoon, afraid she would spill a drop accidentally, curious what disaster would befall us if she did.

"Release the blood of this man," Selma called. She projected as if she shouted to an audience far away, and the tone of her voice was not her own, but deeper. Commanding. She overturned the potion onto the axe with a quick motion. I expected it to splatter, and drip slowly off the edge of the blade like half-baked cake, but instead it spread across the axe's surface with perfect precision. The batter hardened, encasing the weapon in a green shell.

Selma did the same to the cleaver, and then the wood piece. Each time she called out the same words, and each time the potion spread and hardened. A small dollop coated the wedding ring, and all the artifacts were hidden. What next? Beside me, Timber still watched in his wolf form, and the whole thing felt incomplete.

Using her ladle once more, Selma dipped into her half-empty cauldron and stirred around. She was trying to capture the tooth, and in a moment she had it. She drained the potion from the spoon until only the tooth was left, and then she reached out her hand to take it. I gasped, imagining the moss-colored potion spreading to coat Selma's body, hardening her into a statue. But there was no residue on the tooth. There it lay, leather cord and all, as if it had never touched the soup at all. There was no surprise in Selma's face at this. She lifted the tooth with confidence and dangled it from her hand.

Raising it to the sky, she called, "Evil has cursed the blood of these brothers and their sons. Now I use my blood to free them from that curse!" She reached for the hunting knife lying sheathed on the table. With a steady hand she ripped it free, and she slashed at the palm that held the tooth.

I gasped and almost moved forward, but a low growl vibrated my hand and urged me to stay put. From Selma's cut palm, blood dripped onto the tooth. A droplet of red on the black surface and then another, and then the tooth began to glow like a fallen star in the low light of dusk.

"Free them from that curse!" Selma cried again. She held her bloodied knife to the heavens, and she held up the glowing tooth to the heavens, and below her the coated artifacts of the brothers sat right where they were and did nothing.

I waited, breath bated. The tooth would glow brighter and brighter, I thought. The shells of the artifacts would crack open and then Timber would begin to change. I would feel his transformation under my hand.

But nothing happened. After a moment, the tooth lost its glow, and suddenly the whole space around us felt very ordinary again, as if no magic moved there at all. The shells on the artifacts cracked open and the objects crumbled into powdery black ash. In the cauldron, the remains of the potion grew solid as a rock. The tooth was nothing but a black tooth dangling from a bleeding hand.

And Timber's fur was thick as always. He towered above me with big ears, big teeth, and sad eyes. I saw pity in them, and he turned away from Selma to look at me before she could see.

Go to her.

I rushed forward. But I didn't know what to say to her. In my heart I felt angry. *She let us all down*, I thought, before banishing the thought as cruel.

But how would I exact my vengeance now?

Selma hadn't moved. Her arms were still raised as if in triumph. Blood leaked from the cut on her hand and fell onto the white frosted ground. Her mouth was open slightly in surprise, her brow furrowed. It was as if she'd been stricken dumb, frozen in position. Unable to see past the failure of the spell, she had decided simply not to move. Not to go on.

Gingerly, I reached up to take the knife from her raised hand. I placed it gently on the table, careful not to touch the powdered artifacts that were already blowing away in the evening breeze. I took the tooth from her other hand and placed it in my pocket, and then I pressed her bleeding hand against her skirt to stop its flow.

"Hey," I said. "Hey." My eyes searched out hers, which could not focus. My voice was a spotlight, a beacon in her dark. "Hey, Selma. You still with me?" I reached up a hand to brush hair back from her cheek, and she turned

her neck stiffly to gaze down at me, and her expression did not change. Her mouth worked, up and down, but no words came out. Her eyes locked on something past me—Timber. In them was pain and confusion and disbelief.

“It didn’t work.” A raw whisper in a voice that could not have been more different from the commanding calls of the confident witch she had been.

“It didn’t work.” Be regretful, but firm. Do not linger in disbelief—there is nothing for us there. Already, I wished for the sun to fall so that I might climb into bed with my lover and discuss in whispered voices what we would do now to weather the coming war.

I wondered fleetingly if it was my fault. Perhaps the burnt symbol had not been made by the third brother after all. Yet somehow, I quickly disregarded this notion. I’d retrieved what Selma asked for; perhaps she’d asked for the wrong things. Or perhaps, she simply did not have the right kind of magic to counter the sorcerer’s curse.

I put my arm around Selma’s waist and guided her into the cabin. She walked as if she’d aged twenty years, leaning her weight on me and stumbling. In her hair, I noticed a streak of white that had not been there before, and lines around her eyes that I suspected might linger even after sleep. I tucked her into bed like a child, dressing her wound and petting her hair and uttering comforting soft sounds. She did not speak again, only continued to stare blankly. So I told her a bedtime story, shifting seamlessly from one tale into another until she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

Timber was in the living room when I came back out. He was shirtless and warming himself by the fire he’d brought to life in the hearth. His pants hung around his waist untied, and I wondered why he bothered to don them at all. I intended to rip them off shortly, pouring my firestorm of emotions out in a primal exercise of urgency and passion.

“She’s asleep.”

He nodded and said nothing. I got my first good look at his face in the orange dancing light. On it was a sort of haunted expression, a far-away look in the eyes with a furrowed brow and pursed lips. I felt that he was not even in the room with me but existed in the future, or long ago at the time of the first wolves.

“Are you okay?”

His words seemed to remind him I was there, and I saw him come back towards me through a long tunnel. “War is coming.”

“I know. But are *you* okay?”

He frowned. “Why would you ask me that?”

“You look...well, haunted. I didn’t think you wanted to be cured, but now—”

“Cured.” He snarled and his lip curled. “Is that what you think? That being a wolf is a disease that needs curing? Is that what you think we were trying to do?”

I met his yellow eyes, too used to his sharp tones to let them hurt me anymore. “I think that the sorcerer’s true curse was fear. He cursed the brothers by telling them to become what they most feared. As the curse lingered, so did the fear. It passed down generations. It infected the village. I can’t tell you how afraid I used to be before I came to the Woods. All the protections inside the wall only make the danger feel more mythic, more unknown. I think he cursed us all, Timber, me included. But you least of all. Because you’re the least afraid person I’ve ever met.”

He made a small snorting sound and shook his head. “I’m very afraid, Red. Can’t you see that? Do you understand what the failure of Selma’s spell means? It means all-out war.”

“I know that.” My tone was sharp. I was the one who met the sorcerer face-to-face. I was the one who’d seen the troops training in the streets. I was the one whose Gran died to make this war happen.

But Timber went on anyway. “One side will wipe out the other. The village will fall, and Rommel and his brothers will kill every person you ever knew—” Marta’s smiling face flashed across my vision “—or your Huntsmen will fell every tree in this forest, burn every cottage, search every cave. They’ll find us all, and leave none left alive.”

“My Huntsmen? Mine? Timber, are you serious? I left the village. I came back to you. They are not *my* Huntsmen any longer.” My face was red from more than the heat of the fire.

He sighed. “Yes, you’re right, Red. I’m sorry.” But he wouldn’t look at me. He only stared into the flames as if they held his answers.

Long silent minutes passed and worry pierced sharper and deeper in my chest as he stood far away from me, saying nothing. I could not break the spell that held him. And so I only waited.

“Tomorrow I’ll go to see the Alpha,” he finally said. His voice was aged and tired, the sound of resignation. But I was not ready to resign. Not while the apothecary might still live.

“What for?”

“I will try to convince him not to fight. Perhaps we can retreat to the deep Woods. Perhaps—”

“Retreat?? That’s what you want?”

Timber looked at me like my confusion was unfathomable. Like I was a little girl who could not understand. But he was the one who could not understand. “Timber, we have to kill him. We have to fight! Once the sorcerer is dead, we can treat with the villagers. We can find a way to peace. But until—”

Timber shook his head sharply. “What’s happened to you?” In his voice was disappointment and anger, and he searched my face with his eyes as if he hoped to find the girl he once knew.

I held my chin high and stared back at him. “I’ve changed. Seeing death will do that to you.”

“I know,” he said quietly. “I saw too much death, too young. But you can’t let it, Red. You have to be stronger than the impulse for revenge.”

His words passed through me like water over rock. I could not let them in. I could not turn back. “I’m coming with you tomorrow.”

“Red, no—”

“I’m not asking.”

“You’ll stay with Selma. She needs you.”

“For what?” To make her feel better? I’ve got more important things to do.”

At that, he let out a long sigh, and he would not look at me again. Eventually I left him to his brooding.

That night, there were no whispers exchanged in the sweet cuddles before dawn. There was no outpouring of passion. We lay down separately and did not sleep—at least, I did not.

What *had* happened to me? No longer was I that scared, sheltered girl I’d been, but gone too was the compassionate woman who knew the right thing.

It has you now. The vengeance. That’s what the sorcerer said to me. Almost his last words. Was he right?

In me where love had once been was a void of emptiness and cold. I tried to remember Gran’s crinkled, smiling eyes as she told me a tale and the vision would not come. In the pocket of my pants, I fingered the tooth I’d taken from Selma. I circled its sharp point around my fingertip.

Ah, my granddaughter. I've left something behind after all.

40

WHEN TIMBER WAS ready to leave for the Alpha's lair, he found me waiting with Flora already saddled up. With his huge yellow eyes, he stared at me. In them I saw tiredness and sadness and resignation. But he could say nothing, and he did not growl or try to stop me when I followed. Instead, he set a pace I had to work to match. He offered no breaks, and I had no idea the length of the journey.

An hour passed before I recognized our surroundings. Timber's cave was nearby. I imagined us taking a rest there. I could pick berries and he could hunt rabbit, and when evening came we could cuddle together and pass the night in passion and whispers. It would be like it once had been, almost. Would we ever be that way again? Even the cave was not the same now. Gran's troops had carved a road right to its door; I carefully navigated Flora around the many felled trunks.

In the late afternoon, Timber stopped. I slurped gratefully from a stream and massaged my tired thighs, but I'd brought no food to snack on. Soon we continued.

Timber intended to advocate retreat. I wondered what I'd urge for. I wanted the apothecary dead. I wanted the wolves to help. After that, there was no more need for violence.

One final battle.

We approached the lair. I knew where to look to spot the guardsmen. It was strange to remember that the last time I was here, my injuries were so severe I could barely walk. It felt like a lifetime ago, but it was only weeks. Then, I'd been threatened with rape and death and torture. The memories rose, and my fear was so great I could hardly breathe.

The guardsmen, wolves still, though the light was fading, came out from their hiding places behind the pines. Four of them escorted us into the clearing.

I had not been here before the last invasion of the village, but I imagined that time of preparation must've looked very much like this. Piles of axes, each representing a dead Huntsman, lay waiting to be sharpened. Stones turned as the women who lived here performed this task. In the open spaces, wolves fought each other for sport and practice. Occasional yelps complained of teeth dug in too deep. Blood was scattered on the grass like river spray on rocks. These wolves were too excited; they could hardly wait to rip out human throats.

I had never seen the Alpha as a wolf. He was a paler grey than the rest, with scars of age and experience breaking the unchanging pattern of color that covered him. He was big, but not the largest wolf here. It was the quickness of his eyes and mind that earned him his position. He patrolled the fighting rings, moving between groups to observe, correct and congratulate.

Timber approached him and I dismounted. I tied Flora to a post and walked to Timber's side. Our arrival had been noticed; fights slowed and stopped. Eyes turned. Silence descended. Behind us, the guards lingered. We were boxed in. I looked to Timber, but he was a million miles away.

His eyes fixed firmly on the Alpha. He bent to bow, his nose touching the ground. I did not remember him bowing so deep before. Perhaps protocols were different in wolf form, or perhaps he simply wished to keep the Alpha in good humor. I did not bow. Instead, I held my chin high. If he looked my way, he would see a woman who was not afraid like before. But he didn't.

The sun fell, and shadows came out to play. I jumped at the howl that greeted the dark—it was so close, so loud. A young brown wolf only a sprint away issued the alert, his head thrown backwards towards the moon.

They began to change. My heart raced as I realized I'd only ever seen a few wolves change at a time. They were all around me now, like the whole world was twisting itself apart. Half-human creatures growled and groaned. Their bodies heaved and warped. A man's pointed furry ear was as large as his human head. An arm and a leg waved like tentacles in a chest whose fur sloughed off as if he were diseased. It was grotesque, and I did not look at Timber because I had never thought this about him and did not want to now.

The Alpha was a man again. He stood before us naked. The young wolf whose howl greeted the moon rushed to the Alpha's chair to retrieve his fur vest. He draped the fur regally around the Alpha's shoulders, and only after

this brought him pants. Around us, men disappeared into caves to don their clothes. Many didn't bother. Some simply picked axes up off the ground and returned to their fighting. Torches were lit and the flickers of orange danced in the deep blue of the rising dark. The Alpha sat down on his throne.

"Timber. To what do we owe this visit? Have you come to join us in our war?" There was something dangerous in the Alpha's voice. Sarcasm dripped like honey or acid.

"I have come to tell you there is no longer a need for war."

"Really?" The Alpha sounded delighted. Rommel appeared to take up a formal bodyguard position behind his pack leader. He wore nothing but an axe sheath and a smile that made me go cold. "Have the villagers taken down their Wall of Thorns? Have they melted their axes?"

Timber raised his chin. He was naked too, but he wore the darkness around him like it was his own fur cloak. "No."

"Have they vowed never to kill another of our kind? To give us their women?"

"No."

"Ah. Then they must have cast out that bitch Gran. Left her as a present for us."

A rush in my ears. Fire in my chest that raced down to my fingers. I took a step forward, thinking of killing him. I could feel Timber's gaze on me, willing me to look at him so he could steady me with his eyes. But I did not want to look. I did not want to be steadied. But I did, because it would be suicide to kill the Alpha. So I drank in the solidness of Timber's yellow pupils, thinking that they looked like rocks that had sat beside a river for a hundred years. Mine never looked like that. They were always changing, shifting.

The Alpha noticed. He followed Timber's eyes to me for the first time. "Ah, our sacrifice. I see you've decided to join us after all. What a delicious dinner you'll make before we head off to kill your grandmother."

Laughs all around me, deep and predatory. This was not the Alpha I remembered; bloodlust had changed him. Behind his master, Rommel's smile was a snake and his eyes were weapons. Timber looked worried.

"She's already dead," I said loudly. "But my grandfather isn't. You might remember him as the sorcerer who cursed your ancestors. He's

returned to the village and taken command. He is the one who takes up arms against you.”

Murmurs rose around me on every side.

Rommel: “Lying bitch.”

My eyes fixed on him like daggers finding their mark. I stepped forward, leaving Timber behind. “I’m not lying. My Gran came and got me. She brought me back to Big Village. You know this.”

I waited. No arguments. They did know.

“She introduced me to the sorcerer who cast your curse so many generations ago. He was still alive, and had returned to the village in my absence. He was my grandfather.”

There were some murmurs in the crowd at this, but none near the throne. They had already known he was my grandfather.

“I tried to tell my Gran who he really was. He had her preparing for war and I wanted to stop her, to stop her from coming for you all.” Snickers in the crowd; this, they didn’t believe. I spoke over them. “But he killed her. The sorcerer killed my Gran.” I said it out loud and stopped to listen to the words ring in the open air. I think I needed to say it over and over to help process its truth.

The Alpha spoke into the silence. “What wonderful news.”

Behind him, Rommel laughed, and howled to the sky. “I hope that’s true, bitch. I hope he made it hurt.”

There was a buzzing in my ears. Heat inside me flared bright. I wanted to pour it out of me; I wanted to set a fire and watch it burn. Every word they spoke was kindling thrown onto my pile and soon I would light it. Timber tried to reach me again with his eyes, but this time I would not look. The world was orange fire and Gran’s empty blue eyes. My words came out level even as I readied my match.

“The sorcerer killed her, so I killed him. Or, I thought I did. I burned him alive with his own magic; I watched his body fall apart. But it’s possible—” I choked on these words “—he survived. If he is still alive, then you know who your enemy is. Kill him. The villagers are just his pawns.”

“He is our true enemy,” Timber chimed in behind me. His voice was strong and solid, carrying well through the silent air. “An enemy who has remained untouched for hundreds of years as wolves and villagers fought each other. He will pit us against each other again now, watching hundreds

fall around him while he goes on unscathed. The answer to this evil is not all-out war.”

He did not speak of retreat, and I wondered if the truths I’d shared had forced him to try a different approach. They would never retreat now, not from their oldest enemy. Yet this approach seemed to be working. All around us, whispers rose in the air.

The Alpha frowned. He was quiet. Behind him, Rommel looked worried. His eyes darted between the Alpha and the pack, silently assessing.

I almost smiled at their fear. Tonight, I was the predator. I set a fire that spread through whispers.

The Alpha’s gaze found a certain man in the crowd. “Have our scouts heard anything to confirm or dispute this?”

“All our scouts report that the villagers still ready themselves for war.”

“The village has always fought us and they always will,” Rommel said. “Their leader may change, but they don’t.”

“A sorcerer will make a nice appetizer,” someone in the crowd called. “I’ll kill him myself before I kill her whole family.” Rommel laughed as I burned. I had no family left to kill.

“Villagers still need killing. This changes nothing,” someone else shouted.

The Alpha nodded, relieved by the agreement in the crowd. His way forward was clear. Villagers needed killing.

Timber spoke over the rising volume of war-cries. “Erik, may we speak privately?”

Rommel growled. He bared his teeth and stepped closer to the throne, as if to protect his king.

“We may not,” the Alpha replied. He seemed settled again, confident in his path forward. “The pack will continue readying for war. We will kill the sorcerer who cursed us, we will kill the Huntsmen who hunt us. We will kill the builders of their wall and we will take their daughters for ourselves, as tradition has mandated we do since our beginning.”

Whoops and war-cries. Howls and laughs. Into my mind came the image of Marta, lying in a pool of spreading red.

“You don’t have to do that!” I stepped forward and raised my voice. “The sorcerer’s curse made you into beasts instead of men, but you can still choose humanity! Kill him and abandon the old ways. Kill him and you will not have to fear any longer!”

All around me, the kindling took flame. But the fire was out of my control. I wanted them to kill the apothecary, but they wanted to kill everyone. They were afraid of nothing, they screamed. Bring on the war.

I shouted over them. “The sorcerer’s curse was fear. He cursed the brothers to become what they were afraid of. They were afraid to be beasts, afraid to lose their humanity. Don’t lose yours!”

But even as I spoke, they became less human in front of me. Curled lips and growls from their human throats. Those with clothes ripped them off and threw them away, as if ashamed of ever having chosen them.

“Innocent? The villagers!? They’re murderers!”

“Wolf pride!”

“Kill them all!”

The cries lit the air until I could almost see the smoke from the fire I’d lit. I turned to Timber, my eyes desperate. But he was naked and weaponless; he didn’t even have his teeth. Why had I done this? I’d let the fire in my blood take me over and now I was caught in flames of my own making.

Someone grabbed me from behind. Timber moved, a blur of muscle coming through the darkness, but they grabbed him too and held him away from me. Laughter all around us. I’d started a party. They would do now what Rommel had always wanted them to. They would take their revenge on the yellow-eyed sorcerer in the cowardly, easy way.

“Wait!” Timber shouted. “Wait, Erik! There’s another course!”

The Alpha held up a hand to quiet the mob. A small frown creased his forehead and his eyes kept darting to me. He did not like what was about to happen, but he would not stand up to the mob to stop it. Perhaps Timber would offer him a way out.

“Red is the apothecary’s granddaughter. If he’s alive and you have her, safe and unharmed, she could be a valuable bargaining chip. Taking his women has always given us power over him. Use that power to draw him out from behind his wall. Kill him. Then make a new bargain with the villagers, one that brings wealth and women to the pack for a hundred years.”

Hisses in the crowd. They wanted war. No more bargains.

But the Alpha considered Timber’s words seriously. He did not revel in violence for violence’s sake. He preferred to be smart. He did not know what awaited him in the coming fight, but having me in his possession

could only help him. I saw the moment he decided to keep me, unharmed. Then I saw the red blood trickle from the corner of his mouth.

He frowned in confusion. He reached up to touch his bare chest, fingers searching the grey hair for something, but he could not find it. He coughed red and slumped forward. There it was, in his back: the hilt of a dagger, its blade hidden in flesh.

Every eye in the crowd now tracked the same path. Up the hilt to the hand that clenched it, up the arm to the face. Rommel's face, triumphant and shining. He ripped the dagger from his leader's back and the Alpha's body crumpled to the grass.

In the back of the crowd, near the huts, a woman wailed. She pushed through the packed bodies. I recognized her as Ceylona, the Alpha's wife. She knelt beside her husband and rolled him over. He was not yet dead. He breathed out a wet sigh and the blood around his lips bubbled. Then nothing.

"No more bargains," called Rommel. "We kill this bitch, we kill her kin, we kill them all!" His arm was an arrow pointing right at me. At the end of it, the dripping dagger blade. "We are wolves!" he shouted. Yet it was the Alpha's blood on his blade, and the crowd was not sure. They shuffled as each man suffered in his moment of decision.

Some chose quickly, throwing back their heads and howling agreement. Others hesitated long. This was cold-blooded murder; this sort of behavior could not be sanctioned. But moments passed and no one spoke the words.

Timber's eyes found mine. Strong arms still held us both; our fates dangled. But Timber did not look afraid. No, in his eyes there was only the far-away resignation I'd seen in him last night. He was a man with no choice, no choice but to do the right thing. Someone had to say the words.

"Rommel is no Alpha," Timber shouted over the howls. "He has no authority to command this pack! He is a murderer and a traitor and a coward."

Rommel's dagger turned to point at Timber. His face was contorted, lips pulled so far back in an ugly snarl that he hardly looked human. The howls stopped. The mob leaned forward, they licked their lips.

Timber spoke quietly. There was no need to be loud now; every ear listened for his next words. "I challenge you, Rommel, for the position of Alpha."

Had he known last night that it might come to this? Would he have challenged Erik, if Erik had refused to listen? This was the source of Timber's melancholy, I realized. He did not wish to lead a pack that never welcomed him. But now he had no choice.

Rommel hissed. He stepped in front of the throne and the body. "You challenge me?! Packless scum. You're more human than wolf. You have no right to lead us."

"Wait until the day dawns and then we'll see what a wolf I am."

Rommel laughed. He raised his dagger, his eyes gleamed with insanity and violence. "Why wait?"

I wondered myself. Timber was more used to his human form than Rommel was; it would give him an advantage in the fight. But strong arms still held Timber captive, and Rommel cared nothing for tradition or honor. He might run Timber through without ever giving him a chance to hit back. But a wolf could not be held. A wolf could not wield a weapon. It was Timber's only chance for a fair fight.

"This is a pack of wolves," Timber said. "To lead them, you must prove yourself as a wolf. Isn't that all that matters?" He threw Rommel's own words back at him.

Around us, men were nodding. Those who howled and those who stayed silent agreed. The position of Alpha could only be won by a wolf. Rommel clenched his jaw, with no choice but to agree.

So we waited. The crowd broke apart, milling about the clearing. They ate and fought and bathed and returned. Timber and I changed hands, but never were we released. My legs shook with tiredness and I craved a drink of fresh water. As the hours passed, I grew worried. I didn't have to fight for my life after this, but Timber did. I watched him clench and unclench his fists, keeping his muscles loose. He rotated his shoulders and shifted from foot to foot.

With the stillness of a maniac, Rommel sat on the throne. He watched us, a smile playing on his lips. He took breaks to circle the fighting pits and keep the men riled up. He needed them eager for blood. The fate of the camp hung on a knife's edge.

The guards released Timber as the sun rose. They could not hold him through the change.

Those who held my arms were not so kind, and I cried out as fingernails became claws that scratched my skin. As soon as I could, I ripped away. But

still I was surrounded by their heavy, thickening bodies and I could barely breathe. The smell of wet fur stuck in my throat. I shook from standing for so long, but I could not fall down. I was pressed up by the weight of them.

Rommel was the first to howl. The pack took up his call. They arranged themselves in a circle around Rommel and Timber. I stood as if I was one of them.

Timber shook out his limbs. He darted around the circle, getting his blood pumping. Then, he looked at me. I knew he would. My thoughts flew like a bird in a cage, bashing into its bars in blind panic. But I made myself calm for him. So that I could send him a single message with my eyes:

This is the way forward. And I know you're strong enough.

Timber's eyes hardened with acceptance. And Rommel charged.

Timber's head snapped away from me to watch Rommel's approach. His focus was an arrow in flight, and his target was Rommel's throat. As Rommel came within reach, Timber crouched low and opened his jaws. They closed on Rommel's throat, but Rommel's teeth found their target too. Rommel held Timber's neck from above. They shook each other and then released, neither able to keep his grip. Retreating only a step, they circled, teeth bared.

Rommel's teeth were black, like the sorcerer's talisman. Dark teeth and gums in a blanket of yellow fur. Timber's were white, his fur grey as the dawn.

Timber charged. Rommel twisted to avoid his jaws. Over and over, they did this. Rommel bit at Timber's side, but his grip slipped and they parted. Timber caught Rommel's neck once more but he could not hold on.

With growls and barks, they threatened across the distance. Would they charge over and over until one of them, probably Timber, who was clearly the more exhausted, made a mistake that allowed a bite to go deep?

I could see Timber shaking. He'd walked for hours to get here and then stood all night in a single position. Now, his muscles protested. One of his legs gave out under the weight of an attack and I saw the effort it took him to regain his feet and shake the enemy loose. Rommel saw too, he howled in early triumph. But the next moment, Timber charged again.

This time, he went in low—very low. His teeth found Rommel's front leg. There was less fur here, just skin and bone, and Rommel yelped as Timber's teeth dug deep. Timber gave a single head shake, sharp and hard, and then released his hold before Rommel could bend to target Timber's

exposed neck. Blood gushed out from the holes and now Timber was not the only one limping.

Rommel could not charge now; he was not fast enough. Timber had slowed too. Their fur bodies met in slow motion. They wrestled, twisting and scratching, seeking death.

Rommel's teeth snapped over and over. He shook his head wildly, looking to catch at anything. He found Timber's ear and tore it in half. I heard myself cry out. Around me, a hum rose in the mob of wolves. A growl deep in their throats, so low it was only a buzz in the air.

Blood soaked Timber's cheek and blinded his eyes. It matted his grey fur. Rommel struck again, tearing a gash in Timber's side.

Just like Gran's, I thought. How many of those I loved would die from such a wound? And here I stood just watching. It was what Timber would want, but in this moment I didn't care. Could I rush in with an axe and kill Rommel myself? If I did, the pack would surely kill us for cheating. I was a human; I could not win a fight for Alpha. There was nothing to do but watch Timber and believe in him. My wolf could do anything.

Timber blinked, trying to clear the blood from his eyes. He was weak, and Rommel's injured leg suddenly seemed like nothing. Rommel thought this too; he walked the edge of the circle, smiling at the buzzing hum that poured from the throats of his pack. The sound grew louder.

I was the only one who saw the determination harden in Timber's eyes as he let himself fall to the ground.

Rommel went in for the kill. He stretched out his neck and opened his mouth. But as he reached for Timber's neck, Timber moved, a quick surprise. He launched from the ground and latched his teeth onto Rommel's throat. And he thrashed.

Rommel yelped and howled. His claws slashed at Timber's sides. Strands of red appeared on Timber's coat, but Timber would not let go. With all the strength in his neck, he jerked his head from side to side.

Rommel's slashing became frantic. He missed more often. His paws fell to his sides. His yellow eyes grew wide and he gaped at his pack, begging for help. But this was a fight between two wolves, and two wolves only. It was a fight to the death. That was the tradition. The hum grew louder and nobody moved.

Timber did not let go. The edges of his mouth ran red. And then Timber shook his head once more. One final furious toss, and Rommel's throat

ripped free from his body. The body fell lifeless. Strands of muscle and sinew hung between Timber's teeth.

Timber spat, and the bloody mass fell to lie beside its owner. All around Rommel, blood spread in the grass. His eyes were open but dull. In my chest, the tension released. The frantic bird in my heart stopped slamming into walls and settled. My knees gave out and I sank to the grass. My fingers grasped at the short, sharp points, letting them ground me.

My wolf had won.

Around me, the growl grew loud, its vibrations charging the air. Then it stopped, and every wolf in the pack threw back his head and howled as one. *They're honoring their new Alpha.* But I didn't care about that. I cared that Timber would not die. I would not die. There would not be a war.

Timber howled weakly. Then, the ritual complete, he collapsed. His eyes opened and closed slowly; he might soon lose consciousness. With a cry, I ran to his side. Nobody stopped me as I pressed my hands into the cuts along his side that gushed blood. My hands were so small and his wounds were so long. The blood passed around my fingers like a river passes around a stone.

“Where is Ceylona?” I cried. “Bring her! Quickly!” I had not seen her since she dragged away her husband’s body. She might have left camp already.

She hadn’t. She appeared beside me, breaking through the circle of wolves. She had a pack of medical supplies and two women with her; they set to bandaging Timber. We had to work together to lift him so that she could pass the wraps beneath his heavy frame.

“Right now, we have to stop the bleeding,” Ceylona said. His eyes opened and closed as they worked, as if he could do nothing more than relax under the touch of our hands.

“That’s okay,” I told him. “Sleep now. We’re safe. You’re the Alpha. They won’t harm us. Sleep now.”

I did not leave his side. Anxiously, I brushed my hands along his matted fur as he passed in and out of consciousness. “You’ll be okay,” I insisted to him. “You’ll be okay.” Ceylona forced food into me as I kept my vigil.

“I’m sorry about your husband,” I told her.

She clenched her jaw. “There will be time for crying later. For now, this Alpha must be saved.”

At dusk, Timber's transformation woke him. He shrank until his wrappings became nothing. They fell away and left him naked and bleeding. The women rushed forward to re-bandage him.

His right ear was half-gone. Ragged pink tissue on the side of his face. But none of the gashes in his side were deep. In wolf form, it was hard to tell, but now I saw that he would live. *Not like Gran after all.* I breathed a sigh of relief.

"I need to address them," Timber said.

"You need medical treatment," Ceylona answered, and she would not allow him to stand until she had properly treated his wounds. She cleaned each cut with acania tea. Some must be stitched, she insisted. Timber clenched his teeth as she did this, her manner brisk and efficient. After she dressed his wounds, she made him eat and drink. Slowly, small bites and sips. Then Timber would wait no longer.

We helped him to his feet and he stood unsteadily. He called the wolves back together. There were less of them than before, I realized. While Timber lay helpless, some had fled. Rommel's brothers. They would make war, even if we didn't.

Timber fixed his eyes on every man of his new pack, one after the other. For a time, nobody spoke. Then:

"Long live the Alpha!"

I searched for the speaker and found the young man who howled each night to greet the moon. He knelt to one knee and bowed his head. And the others followed.

"Long live the Alpha," they muttered, and fell like a wave to their knees.

The young howler stood first. He scuttled over to the throne. The fur cloak of the last Alpha lay before it on the ground. It was bloody on the inside, but the outside was unmarked. With clear reluctance, Timber allowed it to be placed on his shoulders. It was power and responsibility, that cloak, and my packless wolf had never expected to wear it. He didn't want to now, but it didn't matter what he wanted. It was too late for that.

"This war is over," Timber said. "I will send a message to Big Village. If they give us the apothecary, we will spare them and negotiate peace. No longer will blood stain our Woods. No longer will we hunt and be hunted!"

Around us, there was silence. No howling agreement greeted his declaration. He was still not one of them, and they had wanted war.

41

BIG VILLAGE DECLINED Timber's invitation for peace.

In my mind I imagined the apothecary himself writing the note. I did not know how to picture him; my brain painted a man with craters all over his face, a pockmarked monster. The handwriting must be messy because he wrote it with his left hand. Did he smile a sick silky smile as he rejected Timber's offer?

Send out the apothecary, Timber had written. He will receive justice. Then I, Timber, Alpha of the pack, will meet with whatever leader you elect to discuss terms of peace.

The note returned to us was not so formal.

Declined. Pre-dawn. Tomorrow.

"What does it mean?" I asked as I stared at the handwriting. "If the offer is declined, why give us a time?"

It was late at night. I sat at a council table we'd placed before Timber's new throne. In the other seats were those few others Timber trusted. Timber conducted his discussions with us in the center of the clearing where all the pack could see and hear. No more secrets, he said. I'd barely seen him alone since he was strong enough to walk.

Sampson's jaw was tight. Perhaps it was impending war that made it so, or perhaps it was being back amongst the pack again. One of Timber's first moves as Alpha was to call for him; he'd only just returned from exchanging letters at the gate. "They're telling us when to come to fight," he said. "It's a battle time. At dawn, this coming morning, they will open their gate and come out in force."

"But why tell us that? Wouldn't it be better to surprise us?"

"No." Sampson did not elaborate, but a new man did. Oleanger, a member of the pack. He shared the dead Alpha's short grey hair, and the lines on his face suggested a similar age. I thought perhaps they'd been

brothers. Whatever his reason, he'd come out strong in showing support for Timber in the last few days, and become a part of Timber's council as a result.

"These are our woods," Oleanger said. "They'd never find us all; the second they enter the trees, we have the advantage. They want us to come out and face them on the field."

"And to do that, we'll have to walk there as men. No further time to prepare," Sampson said.

"So then, we shouldn't go." This seemed obvious to me, but Timber shook his head.

"We're going."

"But why?"

Timber's eyes were tired. His wounds were healing well, and I thought it was mostly the weight of responsibility that paled his face. "To negotiate peace."

"That's a fool's mission," I said.

"Then I'm a fool."

Nobody said anything. Timber reclined in the Alpha's chair, which was taller than the simple wooden ones the rest of us sat in. Around us milled the rest of the pack. They kept a wide berth—it still felt, even with Timber as Alpha, that we weren't a part of them—but they listened. I saw men's heads cock as they passed. Wolf hearing was excellent.

"I didn't say that," I said quietly.

Timber shrugged. "Fool or not, I took this pack to bring peace to the Woods. That's what I'll do. If we have to first fight for the privilege to speak, then we'll fight. This will not go on."

I looked around the camp. At a glance, not much was different from the time when Erik was Alpha. Men burned off nervous energy in practice bouts. They cooked food and drank on benches around small fires. They snuck out of camp to set traps and hide axes, though Timber had explicitly forbidden it. Timber said they would accept peace, but was he right?

He sighed. His arm muscles helped him push off the chair. "I'll tell the pack to get ready," he said. "We're going."

So it was decided. In the morning we would clash with Big Village.

I felt strangely excited. The dread I expected to encounter on the verge of battle was not there; instead, a jittery anticipation thrilled me. In hours, I would finally discover if my grandfather lived. I might see him killed. In

hours, the endless war would end, one way or another. Sometimes, even when an ending is horrible, it still brings relief.

After the council, Timber and I retreated to the Alpha's cottage, which was now ours. Ceylona had left only days after her husband's death, assuring us she'd be better off at Grandmother's House. Now we snuggled up in the bed that was once hers and a dead man's.

"Do you think he's alive?" I whispered. My legs wrapped around Timber's like paper hugging a present. My fingers played aimlessly in the bushy hair on his chest.

"We'll find out soon."

"Pre-dawn," I mused.

Timber shook his head in frustration. "So little time to talk before we change. It tells us they're coming to kill, Red. Huntsmen kill wolves, not men."

"Do you have a plan?"

Timber did not answer. His eyes were far away. Without answering, he got up and left me in the bed. I felt nothing as I rolled away to try for a short rest. I was in the same place he was—the future. There was nothing until we were on the other side.

Yet I could not sleep. I got up and went into the dark to search for him.

I knew him well enough to make it easy. He had left the camp and walked back towards his old cave. He sat beside a stream along the route, dangling his toes in the cold trickling water.

I sat down beside him and he did not express surprise. I thought of the things I could say, but none of them were worth the breath. Tonight was an ending...but an ending of what? It was not the shocking, unexpected kind I'd become used to. This ending, we saw coming. This ending, we walked towards by choice.

So I just held his hand and sat with him by the creek. I leaned over to kiss him, and he kissed me back. Our soft lips touched gently. Once, twice. And then I simply laid my head on his shoulder and waited, and breathed in the fragrant air of the forest, and listened to the animals in the night that I had learned not to fear.

"It's time," he said finally. It looked just as dark as ever to me, but I did not have his innate sense of the rising sun.

"Okay." I got up and brushed the pine off my pants, and we walked back together to a camp that was already ready. Men stood around the

central fire. They carried no weapons, for Timber had forbidden it. Yet I knew that an arsenal lay hidden in the Woods near the gate. In so many yellow eyes I saw excitement, eagerness. In some I saw fear, or anger, or dread. Many shifted from foot to foot, toes bare, chests bare. They had not worked to make themselves look more human.

Timber spoke to them. “We go this morning with a hope for peace. I forbid any of you to draw weapons or initiate attacks, unless defending yourselves. Anyone who does otherwise will answer to me!” He snarled and gave his most wolf-like face, but many of the men still held up their chins and the fire was bright in their eyes. I felt the whole world hung on a thread of hair, tipping wildly and about to fall. “Let’s go!” Timber called, and the pack moved as one into the Woods.

We arrived at a closed gate. Timber and I stood at the head of his weaponless army, away from the gate and exposed on the main road—a non-threatening position. Behind him, men populated the shadows. They climbed trees. They found things and hid them behind their backs. Timber looked forward, not seeing it.

Gran’s body wasn’t yet cold the last time I heard the familiar aching creak of the opening gate. Now I heard it again. Behind us, men shifted on their feet and muttered.

“Hold,” Timber said.

Truck after truck rolled towards us. They pulled to the sides of the dirt road to make way for more. We’d have to squeeze between them to charge the gate.

Every bed was full of Huntsmen. Their faces were cold as the steel of their axes—of course they were. They were trained by Gran, after all.

But I didn’t see *him*.

Timber stepped forward while trucks still poured from the gate. There wasn’t much time. “Who is your leader?” he called. The Woods rang with the sound of his voice. The birds stopped singing to watch. Squirrels munched acorns and twittered concern. “I am Timber, Alpha of the pack. There is no need to fight! I wish to speak to your leader!”

I saw that behind that first, tightly parked row of trucks remained an open space in the center of the road. A truck steamed forward to fill it, and I elbowed Timber to draw his attention. His eyes, better than mine in the

dark, fixed on the figures shuffling around in the truck bed. Five Huntsmen gathered, reaching for something. Or someone.

I didn't need to see his face. The shape of his form was enough, hunched and limping. He leaned heavily upon a cane for balance. As he turned, a hot bolt of satisfaction seared my chest. He had only one arm. The other one, eaten away by his own magic potion, had been cut off at the root of the shoulder. Just like Gran's.

Huntsmen flanked him, buzzing like worried bees. He was their hive. Their hands stretched out, ready to catch him if he fell. The moonlight caught his face and I saw that he would not fall. His mouth was a tight line and his legs were strong. He was a weakened man, yes, but sometimes an animal is at its most dangerous when weak.

I hated myself for keeping him alive. He'd paid some price for Gran's death, but not enough. I'd been reluctant that night. I would not make that mistake again.

My grandfather limped past his barricade of trucks. He limped with single-minded purpose. His eyes found mine and locked, as if he did not even see the pack behind me or the Huntsmen who flanked him on each side. He'd come here today for me, I realized. He hated me. It made me feel powerful.

Beside me, Timber raised his chin. His shoulders looked broader than before, perhaps because of the fur that hung from them to brush the tops of his boots. Though there was not a crown atop his head, there might as well have been.

The ancient sorcerer stopped walking. If Timber were a wolf, he could reach out with a paw and bat the old man over; he was that close.

"Have you come to surrender? We accept." Timber smiled a feral smile, though I knew he did not believe his own words.

The old man ignored him entirely. With slow motions, he turned his body to face me. Behind the sea of his trucks, the gate creaked closed.

"Ah, Granddaughter, we meet again. How fortunate to receive an opportunity to express my gratitude," he said, but his voice was ice. "After that unfortunate accident in my shop, I used your axe to remove my arm and save my own life. I don't know what I would have done if you had not left it."

My blood boiled as I thought of how right Timber had been; I should've killed this man instead of offering him mercy.

“We will not treat with you,” I said. “And we will no longer fight your war.” I pitched my voice louder, so that everyone would hear. “Villagers! I am Red! You know me! You know who my Gran was, and you trusted her. This man—” I indicated Timber beside me “—is someone *I* trust. He is Timber, Alpha of the wolf pack. He is *not* the Alpha who attacked the village, invading and killing. This man, this pack, wants peace!”

Silence greeted my announcement. At least it meant they were listening.

Timber spoke to them all. “I have come here today to tell you that we do not wish to fight you. The old times are over, and new times have begun. Leave us to our Woods and you will never see another ounce of violence from us inside your walls. This I swear.”

“Lies!” Spittle flew from the mouth of the ancient apothecary. His eyes were fervent religion and senile desperation. Did I see a touch of insanity? Suddenly I knew: he was near his end. And he knew it.

He cast his voice to reach the crowd. “To believe the word of a wolf is nothing but stupidity. **Believe me!** These are the wolves who killed our beloved Gran!”

The Huntsmen murmured agreement. How could you trust a wolf?

“I loved her as you did, but we want more than vengeance! We want our future! A future free from fear!”

His words were almost the words I’d speak myself. Yet he lied; they were all lies. Lies that dug up fervent generational hatred and flooded it into the hearts of those who heard. I watched a sea of eyes harden as his message spread like a wave throughout those gathered.

Timber tried to shout over the murmurs. “Yes, a future free from fear! But we can build that future without killing each other today! We can build it together!”

But those who listened before did not now. Their whispers swirled around me like a fire rushing to consume dry brush. Curiosity cannot live beside hatred in a heart.

Believe me!

Huntsmen drew their axes and stepped from the beds of their trucks.

Believe me!

Behind me, the men of the pack revealed their sharp, hidden secrets. Axes and knives appeared in their hands, birthed by the pine brush. They began some kind of chant. Timber looked to me, desperate.

And my stomach clenched with understanding. My hand descended into my pocket to finger the sharp point of the sorcerer's blackened tooth.

You have it in you after all, he had said to me. The magic. The conviction. I can't not tell you now, can I?

For what was magic made of? It was nothing but blood and conviction.

Suddenly my life was a picture book I could flip through, observing each page.

Don't be afraid, I told the children in the bunkers. And they weren't. Live, I told Gran, and she did.

I remembered Luthor hesitating when I screamed "Stop".

And my own grandfather laughing as I demanded he tell me why he killed Gran. *I can't not tell you now, can I?*

My eyes latched onto him across the space. He was cocky, confident. Soon, his men would rush forward and begin killing. Or so he thought.

I stepped forward, leaving Timber behind. I cast my voice to the entire gathered crowd. And I poured out magic.

"**Believe me!** This man—" I gestured to Timber "—is not your enemy. The wolves are not the enemies you believe. This war can be over with no bloodshed, if you will only stand down and treat with us."

Before me, my grandfather frowned. He was confused. Could he feel his puppets hesitate? Could he feel my power rise to compete with his?

I saw the moment he realized. That I understood now. I understood what I was capable of. I watched the fear wash over him like a wave.

For magic was an exercise of will. And I was the granddaughter of Gran, who won more fights than he ever talked his way out of. I had his blood and her power.

I saw the moment he understood he was going to lose.

"Kill them!" he cried. "Kill them all!"

"Please!" Timber called out. "We wish only for peace!"

"They stole your children! They killed your friends! They killed Gran! They are wolves! Monsters! Kill them all!" My grandfather's eyes bulged, and the effort of screaming his magical commands seemed to cost him even his ability to stand. He wavered and his detail of Huntsmen caught him and held him up as the blood rose to his face to redden it. He shook with weakness and fury, and all around him like his little dolls the Huntsmen took their first steps forward. Their eyes searched the shadows for the shapes of men that they did not believe were men.

It wasn't working. I was too unpracticed. The sorcerer had spent months, years, weaving his lies into their minds. I did not have enough time.

Timber turned to me. His eyes begged. *Go, get out of here.*

But there was no way. I would make them see. *I have to make them see.*

My blue eyes met the yellow eyes of my grandfather. Behind my lashes burned righteous rage and sorrow, and the power and magic passed to me by both my grandparents. My gaze burrowed into him, this ancient evil man, and he could not look away.

Rising up from memory, Selma's words offered an idea:

"They say the apothecary could cast a spell without any potion. They say he could just speak things and make them happen. They say that when he cursed the brothers, he just stood there and talked to them, fingering the tooth of a wolf that he wore always around his neck."

Inside my pocket I rubbed my finger across the eroded surface of the wolf's tooth. I smiled at the murderer of my Gran as I spoke his curse.

"Become what you most fear," I whispered.

The sorcerer's face blanched and he shook his head as if to beg me. The blood that had reddened his face was gone now, and he looked like a ghost of his former self. His eyes were wet and afraid, glossy almost like Gran's had been, in the end. Gone was the sharpness, the silkiness, the calculated portrayal of strength. This was the man as he truly was. A coward who was about to die.

I projected my voice to address all the creatures of the Woods, and into every word I spoke I poured my power.

"Wait!"

The Huntsmen stopped moving. The wolves loosened their muscles. They shook their heads, muddled, confused.

"You all know me. You know that I am the granddaughter of Gran, who was loved and respected inside the village, feared and respected outside it. She taught me, as she taught us all, to fear the wolves of the Woods. To fear them most when they get inside our wall. To fear them most when they disguise themselves as men, who can lie and trick us. They are most dangerous of all then, when they wear our clothes and pretend to be our friends." I looked back at Timber, proudly wearing the fur of the Alpha across his wide shoulders. "Please, believe I understand the fear you've

been taught. But my friends, it is not wolves we must fear. It is lies and deceptions. It is beasts who are not what they seem.”

Around me there were growing whispers of agreement. Gran had taught us well, and it was her teachings I drew on now. I could not, in a single span of minutes, teach them all to unlearn hate. But I could use it. Turn it. “Friends, you have all been tricked by a predator in your midst. A monster pretending to be one of you.”

I heard a strange bone-cracking noise, and I did not look. Whispers rose around the yellow-eyed man and the Huntsmen holding him stumbled back. They collided with the Huntsmen in line behind them, and I saw the whole crowd shift like waves retreating.

“We do not have a fight with each other, but there is an enemy in our midst.” I addressed the villagers. They’d come for blood, and they could have it. “A wolf has crawled into bed with you, and you trusted him as you did my Gran. How could you realize that he was the one who killed her?”

Sounds of awe and fear were issuing from the crowd now, and I allowed myself to look. The transformation was almost complete. Still, his eyes were yellow, and his ears and teeth were pointed. But long fur overtook his skin as he thickened. He’d grown so tall that villagers might look up and see him over the top of the wall. What big ears he had; what big teeth.

Lucky there were a hundred Huntsmen in the Woods.

“My friends, my fellow villagers. Wolves of the Woods who have waited long for vengeance!” I raised my empty hand into the sky, and someone threw me an axe to fill it. “It is time now to fight the true enemy that we all share! It is time to avenge Gran! Avenge us all!”

The sorcerer was a beast now, entirely. Pointed ears, and teeth that were black like the tooth I finally let rest in my pocket. His fur was yellow like driven snow, and his snarl echoed through the Woods. Birds fluttered into the sky, and the commanders amongst the Huntsmen screamed to kill him, kill this creature who had pretended to be one of them.

They streamed around their vehicles, racing towards the sorcerer. From behind me, men with yellow eyes flew forward, wind come to life. In their hands were axes, and their eyes shined with pleasure in their vengeance. Behind the trees, the sun’s first sharp stab of light lit the world.

The creature had only three legs. The fourth was a stump, ugly and scarred, and he did not know how to balance. He sat on his hind legs and

batted his enemies off him like ants. They were tiny beside him, and he threw them easily. His ears were in the branches of the trees.

But there were too many of them. Huntsmen and wolf-men—it was hard to tell who landed each blow. The villagers and the wolves fought alongside each other as brothers, and when the shining orb of the sun rose and the yellow-eyed men grew teeth, still villager and wolf ripped at the flesh of their ancient enemy together.

That day was the first in our long history that wolf fought alongside Huntsman, axes and teeth turned on the same target. The yellow-eyed monster did not last long.

In the end, as my grandfather fell, his towering shape drifting slowly to the ground like a ruined log falling, his yellow eyes found mine. I could speak to him the way I always could to Timber.

Ah, my granddaughter, he said. *I've left something behind after all.*

42

WHEN MY GRANDFATHER was dead, his massive furry shape a small mountain between old enemies, the wolves and the Huntsmen parted like water and oil, each retreating to stare at each other across the distance. Like waking from sleep, like coming out of a spell, the Huntsmen blinked at the dawning day. They huddled around their trucks as the wolves hugged the shadows and the trees. All were quiet; unsure what to do next.

The fight was over. Yet no hands could be shaken; no terms could be agreed to.

Near the gate, a senior Huntsman called a command, and the gate began to creak open. Huntsmen mounted their trucks and turned them around. They were going back inside.

I stood alone, the only human in a sea of wolves. But the sun was high enough that, even across the distance, I could recognize faces.

“Victor!” I called. “Victor!” Though I couldn’t quite count him a friend, he was the highest ranking officer I knew by name. He turned at the sound of my voice. “There can be peace in the Woods. The wolves *will* accept peace, now that the sorcerer is dead. I don’t know who is in command now, but...will you tell them to speak with us, please?”

Victor looked dubiously at Timber, who guarded my side. “I’ll pass your message.”

“Thank you! There will be scouts waiting for a reply. There *can* be peace in the Woods. There *can*!”

Victor turned away. I remembered once feeling how he must now. Like the truth was not true, and the world was not the color I always thought.

The pack returned to the lair. Trotting in their huge bodies, it was not a far and strenuous walk. They ran ahead and doubled back, darting and playing

in the trees. Timber walked more slowly, with me. I could've spoken to him, but I didn't. I did not know how to feel.

That night, Timber sent Sampson to wait at the gate. "They will not pass up this chance," he assured me. "There will be peace in the Woods."

A future free from fear, I thought. Could we make my grandfather's false promise a reality?

Once I thought it, the idea would not go away.

With the moon in the sky, the men celebrated the vanquish of their oldest enemy. They threw ancient logs in the fire and lit up the sky. They danced and drank like free men, the human women around them laughing. Even Timber laughed and smiled. For now, he'd evaded battle and bloodshed. I saw hope in his eyes again. Soon we might meet the villagers across a table to negotiate a lasting peace.

But I did not dance. I did not drink. I stood and watched the dancers, I nodded to the drum beat, while my mind turned just a few words around and around.

A future free from fear.

I had magic. I had magic like my grandfather. I had even more than him, perhaps, for Gran's blood pumped in my veins making me strong. He had turned men into wolves, and so had I. He had commanded their wills, and so had I. I had the magic that Selma had not quite been able to reach.

And there was Timber, dancing around the fire on human legs, a laugh in his eyes and on his lips. I had asked him once if he wanted the curse broken, but he had never answered me for himself. He had answered only for what it would mean for peace.

As if he knew I thought of him, the eyes of my wolf found mine. In his was a question. Why did I sit here frowning and not dancing? I did not want him to read the answer in my eyes. I stood up and walked alone into the Woods.

It was funny to remember that I had once been afraid of them. Every sound was a startling terror, every root an enemy trying to hurt me. My hand reached down to touch my thigh where it was scarred. I couldn't see those marks and not think of Gran, not anymore. I thought how lucky I was compared to her. If this was her choice, I knew what she'd do. But it wasn't. It was mine. I made my way to the creek where I'd sat with Timber last night, and I sat down again.

Of course Timber followed. I felt a stab of guilt that I'd made him leave the fire to come see what was wrong with me, and yet I knew that it was truly his caring that had sent him, and was not my fault.

"I can break the spell," I said. "Do you think that I should?" Because, though I'd thought only moments before that it was my decision, I realized suddenly that it wasn't mine at all. The decision belonged to Timber. It belonged to the wolves who would be forever changed.

That was the difference between my grandfather and I. He had altered men without their consent, to hurt them and benefit himself. I would do it only if it was what they wanted. I could imagine how it would be for me if Timber were a man all the time; I could imagine how the village would fare surrounded by empty Woods. But none of those considerations were important.

"It's not my decision," Timber said. "Not just mine. There can be peace now, whether we are wolves or men. It is no longer for us to choose." His thoughts mirrored mine exactly.

I turned around to face him in the moonlight. His face was serious, a return of the expression he wore when he worried over this morning's meeting. Or perhaps it was even more serious now as we discussed not death but destiny. Could I truly change his destiny forever?

"Let's go ask them."

We stood and began to walk back towards the clearing. I reached for his hand, and he squeezed as our palms touched. But the terrain of the forest meant I soon let go, and when I looked over at Timber as we walked, his eyes were once again far away, and I felt once again alone.

A sea of dancing, joyous men parted as Timber and I approached the fire. Timber held up his hands to call for quiet. His chest was still bare, and the fur slid up as he raised his arms. It pooled behind his shoulders. As soon as they were quiet, Timber turned to me and their eyes all followed.

So many similar eyes. Would they stay yellow when the curse was broken? Would Timber still have those bunching shoulders and that hairy chest? Who would he be without half of himself?

I spoke into the expectant silence. "You all know the story. Generations ago, a sorcerer cursed four brothers, and ever since their descendants have been the wolves of these Woods. Men under the light of the moon, and wolves during the day. Tonight, we killed that sorcerer. We killed him together with the villagers, who once were your brothers. Now I tell you

that I, the granddaughter of that evil man, can break his spell. If you wish to—only if you wish to—you can be fully human again.”

Timber spoke over me. “She will not choose for us. And I will not choose for you. The pack decides. We take a vote.”

Some in the crowd scoffed. “A true pack leader would decide for us,” someone called. Their face was shadows.

“If we do this, we will no longer be a pack. We will be men. Men choose for themselves.” Timber’s voice cracked like a whip, and his eyes sparked. He was proud to be a man, he said silently to them.

The men began to whisper. Those with wives tilted their heads as the women whispered excitedly in their ears. I felt sure of how those men would vote. But what would Rommel’s old allies want, or those wolves who had yet to show Timber true loyalty?

“Would we go back to the village?” someone called.

“I don’t know. I don’t know if they’d have us. I don’t know if many of us would choose it.” It was clear in Timber’s voice that he would not, and a rush of agreement from the crowd proved he was not the only one. And yet I thought a few would. They would choose, like Marta, the safety of the wall and the peace of a protected family.

Other concerns were raised—where would they live? How would they survive once they could not hunt rabbits with their teeth and stay warm simply by the fur that grew on their backs? But in the end, the most important concern was understood. Identity. Were they men, or beasts? What would they choose, now that they could choose?

The married wolves voted for humanity.

Those left of Rommel’s pack voted to stay as they were. I think they still would have voted to kill me, if that had been on offer.

Jay’s brothers surprised me. They voted for me to end the curse. And I wondered if it was their fear of themselves that had made them cruel—cornered animals snapping in terror.

Timber would not vote. Instead he only turned to me after all the other votes were cast and said, “The yeas have it. Break the curse.”

I stared at him. With every yes or no called out from the crowd, I’d waited on the edge of a breath for his. Since meeting him, I’d wondered and sometimes asked: Did he want to be what he was? Now I might change him forever without knowing the answer.

Suddenly the weight of what I had offered to do bore down on my shoulders like a heavy yolk, and I felt a lump in my throat. I might never again cuddle up against the giant form of my lover and scratch his head or tickle his soft fur or bury myself in the safety of his chest.

I found my voice. “When?”

It was almost morning. I sensed suddenly among them that they wished to transform one more time. They wanted to be wolves when I did it, so that they could feel the curse break, shatter, and not merely slip away. Timber must’ve sensed it too.

“We’ll wait until after dawn,” he said.

After that, the crowd dispersed. Men went to think, they went to rejoice, they went to mourn, or perhaps to run far from here and never come back, hoping that my spell would not reach them. As soon as they began to move away, I went for Timber, planning to make him tell me his true wishes, but he disappeared into the Woods before I could. Though I searched until almost dawn, I could not find him.

When I returned to the clearing, the world was pink. He was already there waiting, but the pack crowded around him, speaking to him for reassurance, speaking to him in excitement, and he managed their hopes and fears and would not even look at me.

My wolf. That’s how I’d thought of him as soon as I stopped feeling afraid and started to feel protected. Some of the pack used the form as an excuse for cruelty, but it is truly men who are cruel. My time in Grandmother’s House taught me that wolves are spirits with hearts as big as their teeth; it was because of this that I thought of Timber as somehow *more* of a wolf than the others. What would he be without that part of himself?

Dawn came once more—for the final time, I thought morbidly. The sky turned red, and then yellow, as the sharp cutting light of the sun flashed on the horizon. All around me, men became wolves. I felt the heat of their bodies rising as the world thickened. I stood at the center of a circle of fur, a sea of yellow eyes looking at me in my Gran’s red jacket. The young wolf who had crowned Timber in his furs tilted back his head and howled at the new sun, and all the others followed. Louder than ever, they howled their last.

My heart was beating a race in my chest. I felt my palms shaking as I reached one more time for that blackened tooth inside my pocket. I pulled it

out and held it high. My eyes met Timber's and searched for a message, but his were blank and I was alone.

Only yesterday, I cursed my grandfather with barely a thought. But this magic was bigger. The words I spoke now would affect hundreds, thousands. They would reach over the Wall of Thorns and through the trees to Grandmother's House. They would span back into the past and forward into the future, changing the fate of generations. Selma had tried and failed; now I stood to try with only a tooth and a few words. And yet I knew that I could do it.

Should I do it? I still wasn't sure.

Inside me I gathered up all the strength that Gran had left me. My thumb and fingers clenched the tooth as if I meant to draw blood from it. In fact...deliberately I pierced my finger. Selma's spell had called for blood, and I felt inside me that this was right. A single droplet leaked out to coat the tooth's tip.

The world around me was not silent. It waited impatiently. Birds chirped their good mornings and wolves shifted on their feet. Some eyes eager and some full of dread. Forming their own crowd, the women held each other, hands clasped tight in hope.

No pressure.

My gaze sought Timber. Surely I would see something now—hope or fear, excitement or anger. But he had turned away from me to face his pack and I could not even see that patch of white fur on his stomach.

I might never see that again. But the decision had been made.

I called out into the clearing of gathered wolves.

“Standing before me are souls bound in fear. They are bound, with others in these Woods, and their ancestors, and their descendants, by an ancient curse issued by my blood. Release the ancestral curse that binds them. Release them from fear and falsehood. Release them to the form that's true.”

My head began to spin. The world was a whirling mass with blue above it. My arm was falling to my side with the tooth still clenched tight inside red fingers. My words had flown away and taken something of me with them. My knees were collapsing...was I falling? There was the grass beneath my skin, scratching me with its dryness. Inside my chest I felt something draining out. A hole had been poked in me and something was leaving through it. Some life essence. Some power. Before my eyes swam

Gran's face, and her scar stood out sharp. Her eyes were fierceness, and I reached for her and she put out her hand. My hand met hers and I grabbed on tight, the tooth between our palms. In my ears there was a deep drum beat and a buzzing sort of hum. The world spun faster and faster as the hole widened. But no longer was I going to be sick; no longer did I fear I might die. Gran's eyes anchored me as I looked across at her aged face, hard above a red leather jacket.

The world stopped spinning as if a giant had slapped his hand down to stop a top. I crashed back to clarity and gasped at the sharpness of the colors in the clearing. Shades of grey and yellow shifting to brown. Looming shapes drifting down, down, revealing more of the blue sky. I blinked and sat up. Gran disappeared as if she had never been there, but inside my heart I could feel her stopping the hole. In time perhaps I'd discover what it was that had left me. I could look in the mirror and see if I had white strands of hair. For now, I looked around a clearing full of men that had only moments ago been wolves.

It worked. I'd broken the curse. The wolves of the Woods were men once more.

Then I saw him. The lone wolf. The only one left, sitting calm as anything on his hind legs. He'd turned, and his yellow eyes watched me. What did he see on my face when I recognized him? Light grey fur with a patch of white on his stomach. Timber.

Timber was still a wolf.

43

I COULDN'T WAIT to speak to Timber, but of course he could not speak. All around us men shrieked and laughed and grasped each other by the shoulder. They cried and embraced and shouted and whispered that they couldn't believe it, they couldn't possibly believe it. Gone were their yellow eyes and pointed ears. The teeth in their mouths were bright and average, and their bodies, though still muscular, were no longer strange. Some of them ran up to hug me and some of them forgot I existed. Some of them glowered at Timber; muttering with resentment, they scattered.

Slowly I stood from the ground where I'd fallen. My eyes were locked on Timber and I could not look away. All the space around us was just a blur; it did not matter. With small uncertain steps, I approached my wolf. I stood before him looking up, as always, to his furry face. His eyes were calm and blank, saying nothing. I do not know what my eyes said to him. Apology, sorrow, joy.

Why would my spell work for everyone but him?

"I'm sorry. I don't know why—"

But should I apologize? I didn't even know if this was what he wanted.

Still he stood solid and blank. I shook my head and turned away. I walked out of the clearing and into the Woods. I began to run through the Woods. I sought out Flora and vaulted onto her back.

I didn't realize where I was going until I got there: the once-abandoned cottage now occupied by Selma. She opened the door at the sound of Flora's hooves and I felt relief ease a tightness in my chest. I dismounted quickly and tied off Flora. I strode over to the older woman and I threw myself into her arms. We hugged tight, like lost friends who have been apart far longer than a week. But so much had happened in the short time, it felt like ages.

I pulled back in her arms and looked up at her face. New wrinkles had joined the few she had before, and the white streak in her hair was still there. I still hadn't looked to see if I had a matching one of my own.

"Selma. I broke the spell."

She smiled, a sort of sad grimace. Sad for herself, happy for me. "I know. I felt it."

"Timber is still a wolf."

Selma frowned. "During the day, or always?"

My heartbeat skipped as a worry I hadn't even considered took hold of me. "I—I don't know. Could that happen?"

"What did you do? What did you say?"

"I told them to release the false form. Take the form that was true."

Her eyes met mine, and I knew without her having to say anything. It could happen. Selma's arm came around my shoulder. She looked up at the newly risen sun.

"We'll get you back in time for night, and then you'll know. For now, come inside and drink some restorative tea and tell me everything that's happened."

So I went in with my friend and I drank her tea, cup after cup until I felt strong. I told her I had killed my grandfather. I told her there would be peace between the Woods and Big Village. I told her I had discovered my magic and realized I could break the curse, and the wolves had voted for me to do it. I didn't know what Timber wanted; he had refused to say.

"But don't you know?" Selma asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, Red. You know him. You know him better than he's ever let anyone know him. Don't you know what he wants?"

I had no answer for Selma except a feeling of shame. I sat silent and drank my tea until she spoke of something else. My glance found the sun over and over and I left early in the afternoon to be sure I was back with the pack before the sun set. But Timber was not there. I remounted Flora and I rode to where I knew he would be.

His old cave, that place where I saw him for the first time and learned the true form of the wolves. He was there, his furry frame curled around a dead fire, the old ash his only companion. His eyes opened when my footsteps scuffed the stone at the entrance; he squinted at me in the falling

light. I said nothing and he did not move, only closed his eyes again and lay there pretending sleep.

I stood as if keeping vigil. With every heartbeat I counted the time. I watched the falling sun. I waited to hear the telltale howl that signaled the night, but of course it never came. The young wolf who'd made that sound was a man now, perhaps already planning the cottage he would build, perhaps already dreaming of the human girl he'd find to marry. So the sun fell with no chorus to mark its going, and I had no way of knowing the exact moment when Timber would change or stay the same.

The shadows gathered around him in the cave. I wanted him to come out into the light of the moon, but he would not move.

"Timber, come on, come out. The moon is rising." Another glance outside proved the sun's last rays had ceded the sky to the moon and the first stars. "Timber—"

I looked back at him, and a whoosh of breath left my body and my knees collapsed, dropping me like a rock onto the stone. There the fur went, tightening into his body. There his ears went, and those massive teeth, and his legs became arms and there he was, my lover. A man again. I couldn't speak. Relief swept through me like a chemical cleansing, scraping out the poisonous roots of fear I'd watered all day long.

Timber stood up, naked and glorious, and he looked at his own hands as if surprised.

"God. Selma thought maybe you'd always be a wolf. She thought maybe you wouldn't turn back anymore."

My wolf blinked. He'd feared it too.

"Why didn't the curse break for you?" I whispered. "She had no answer and neither do I."

Was this what he wanted? Or perhaps my own desires had polluted the spell. Had I feared another loss so much that I kept my wolf cursed to keep him the same?

"Come here," he said, and I got off the ground and rushed to him. I curled into the pillow of his hairy chest and gratitude flooded me at the familiarity of his bigness, his softness and his hardness. His powerful primal energy, which once scared me, now comforted me. Following this instantly was shame. What if my feelings really were the reason his curse had not broken?

“Timber, I’m so sorry,” I whispered, my voice raspy. “I’ve left you alone.”

At that he stiffened. He pulled back from our hug, his hands releasing my arms. But he only smiled at me tightly and said, “Let’s not talk about it. We should get back to the others.”

My throat was thick and all I wanted was to make love to him by a fire until the sun fell, but I nodded instead and followed him silently out of the cave and through the Woods. With every crunching step on frosted ground, I tortured myself with regret. Timber had been alone for most of his life, packless and different. Now because of me, he was the only one left of his kind. There was no loneliness deeper than that. In my mind, my grandfather’s laugh sounded.

44

DAYS PASSED IN the new world. Axes found a fresh purpose—their original one—cutting down trees. The few builders in the pack taught the others, and men began building homes from the trunks. Timber rolled most of the logs himself, pulling against ropes with his massive weight. The men watched him work, some with pity, some with jealousy, and some with respect. To all of them, he was no longer one of them.

Still, he had much to teach them of the ways of men. Many in the pack had slept through their human hours all their lives. They'd never built homes and skinned rabbits. They could not turn down Timber's advice and guidance. He had little time for me as he worked in every moment he could speak to pass on his knowledge. He recalled Sampson from the gate to share the burden. All those with knowledge of how to live as humans were indispensable.

Except for me. I still knew so little of how to survive in the Woods. I had a fraction of the knowledge of the other women, and more and more I retreated to spend time with Selma. Perhaps her restorative tea could cure something sick in me, something that poisoned just out of reach.

Every day I felt strong and weak at once. A sort of violent, militant strength pounded in my muscles from waking to sleeping. My body moved amongst the pack, doing what chores I could, but as my arms lifted or scrubbed or plucked, my mind would float over to the image of Gran lying dead on my bed. As the heart-pounding pain of this memory pierced me, I would look around me at the people who were not *my* people, and I would feel myself to be alone. Then I'd look automatically for Timber, and I'd see him standing there in his aloneness too, but he would not look at me. So instead I'd go see Selma, or I'd lie alone by the ashes of the old dead fire where Timber and I first met, and I'd recall the glossy emptiness of Gran's

eyes and all that red, and my heart would pound with exhausting, forceful strength, and then the next day I would wake up the same and do it again.

Scuffles amongst the men divided them as the new world teetered, finding its feet. Reports reached us of wild men living deep in the Woods; they headed for Grandmother's House and attacked any of our people who approached them. "Rommel's brothers," I said, and Timber nodded tightly. He sent his fastest runners to warn the women.

Those in our camp who'd voted "no" tried to adapt to their new, unchosen reality. A few succeeded, though many left camp after a brawl with another faction over living arrangements.

I spoke quietly to Timber as we watched them stalk away and disappear. "You think they'll join the men who used to belong to Rommel?"

Timber nodded.

I laughed bitterly. "I guess there isn't peace after all."

Timber's answering voice was quiet and inexpressive. "Men and other men never find peace forever. But I think at least we can find a way to not have constant war."

Big Village agreed to peace talks. When the runner came with the news, my eyes sought Timber's. Eye contact. Connection. The thrill of elation as he approached the realization of what he'd worked for all this time. But he only nodded, satisfied, and turned away.

I ran after him. "This is great, isn't it?"

"Of course."

I grabbed his arm. "Come to the cave in the morning. Sleep there with me. And in the afternoon we can celebrate."

Timber shook his head. "I'm needed here, Red." Even his voice sounded far away.

"I need you too."

"You don't anymore. You don't need me, and you don't want what I am." He said it in a toneless voice, a statement of reality without hope or sadness. He walked away before I had a chance to disagree.

What was his problem? Did he think that I would abandon him because the curse didn't break for him? He was so shut down, like a man bracing himself for bad news. I had no intention of abandoning him. Although...

I'm so sorry. I've left you alone. That's what I told him after I'd broken every curse but his. Alone in his dual nature, I'd meant, but now I wondered

if he'd heard something in my words that I hadn't intended to say.

But how could he? I'd promised him I'd come back to him and he wouldn't be alone anymore. I'd kept my promise. How could he doubt me?

But when I reached for the memory of my tender feelings on that night, I grasped only air. Into my mind came the image of Gran's dead blue eyes.

Yes, I stood at Timber's side. My body had returned to the Woods. But there was a part of me that had never left my bedroom. I knelt there still, looking at Gran for the last time, like time had stopped and trapped me.

We're both alone, I realized. *He's not the only one who's distant.*

Was it really me who'd put all this space between us? Had I made Timber think my remoteness, my coldness, was about him?

I tried to feel remorse. I told myself that I should run to him right now and tell him that the hate and grief that haunted me were not about him at all. I could throw my arms around him and the strange spell that had trapped me would be broken. But instead I only turned and walked slowly away.

45

THE GATE RUMBLED slowly open. Six villagers were revealed, standing in a line. All were unarmed. As one, they strode out to greet us where we sat at a large table placed earlier on the Huntsmen's path.

I sat as a member of Timber's own council of six. Beside me sat a reluctant Sampson and a hopeful Oleanger. The fifth man was married; his expectant wife had thanked me for breaking the curse. The couple might get to raise their daughter together. The final man was one I barely knew, and I'd argued against including him. The tattoo of a tree on his arm was reason enough for me to distrust him, but Timber did not agree. The old pack divisions didn't exist anymore, he told me. "If we want to erase division, we start amongst our own people."

I studied the approaching villagers. Victor was not the only one of them in leathers. An older man and a younger woman wore them too; it was strange to see the uniform with no weapon strapped over the shoulder.

The other three members of the committee were civilians. Belatedly, I recognized the village mayor. He used to come over for tea. More well known to me was the librarian who kept all the town's historical records. He was a measured man, who considered long before he spoke. He taught me to see that history was a gift, full of lessons. Whoever had chosen this committee had chosen wisely.

The gate remained open. Four Huntsmen, heavily armed, stood before it at attention. Behind them I could see nothing in the empty white safe-zone, but I suspected that Huntsmen waited en masse behind barricades, armed and ready. Behind us in the Woods, there was no one. Timber had refused every man who offered to act as armed guard. If tonight did not go well and there was bloodshed, he would not allow it to spread beyond the few of us at this table.

Lanterns provided enough light to see by. The sun had fallen long ago, and the moon was thin.

“Welcome,” Timber said, standing to greet the council. “Thank you for coming.”

None of them answered him. A few tight smiles, and then they pulled out their chairs and sat.

Victor and the mayor took the center seats, across from Timber and me. Stiffly, Victor offered introductions. He was the new Supreme General. The young woman in leathers was his second, and the older man his third. The civilian I did not know worked in resource distribution. The librarian and I nodded to each other in greeting from across the table.

Timber introduced his companions as well, and then we all lapsed into silence, unsure of what to say first. Timber broke it, of course.

“Before we get started in planning for our future, there are some things you should know about the past.” He looked at me, and I took a deep breath. It was my story to tell, we’d decided. The truest story I knew had a new ending.

“Once upon a time,” I started, and I told the old tale of the apothecary and his curse. But the end of that story was only the beginning of mine. I told them of Gran, and her time in the Woods as a girl. I told them how the apothecary killed her, and how I used the magic I had in my blood to break his curse. “The morning after his death, I ended his legacy. There are no more wolves in these Woods.” I glanced sidelong at Timber to see his reaction to my slight lie, but he didn’t even blink. He was studying the committee for their reactions, which so far seemed mostly to be disbelief.

“Of course you will need proof of this,” Timber said quietly. “We would expect nothing less. The next meeting may take place under the light of the sun, so that you might all see for yourselves.”

But Timber could not attend that meeting. No wonder he insisted on bringing these other men here today. He’d told me that any of them might someday make a good leader for the men who were once wolves. Now I realized he intended to pass on his leadership more imminently. One of them must head the next round of negotiations.

“That’s—” Victor sat back in his chair, and the mayor looked positively flabbergasted. Their team exchanged looks. We had just changed everything. Whatever preparation they’d done for this negotiation was irrelevant now.

“Your wall will easily keep out the men of the Woods,” I said quietly, “though some of them might like to be welcomed back among you, especially those with families.”

“Families?!” the librarian said. I’d almost forgotten how little the villagers knew of the wolves and their lives in the Woods.

“Yes, some of them have wives and children. For all those who choose to stay in the Woods, supplies will be needed. They can no longer hunt for food as they once did, and some help in establishing their new lives would be appreciated.”

The former wolves shifted uncomfortably as I spoke these truths. They had chosen human lives, but their first weeks as humans had not been easy. There was so much to learn, and asking the village for help rankled.

“We are able to offer fair exchange for any help we receive,” Oleanger said. “We are strong and capable men, with many skills you do not know.”

Victor nodded, though his second was frowning, and the mayor still seemed too thrown to offer any response at all.

“First things first,” Victor said. “Terms of peace. That is what we came here for—let’s stay on subject.”

Oleanger nodded. He and Victor began to speak in earnest. Sampson offered his thoughts, and the mayor occasionally interjected. Soon a lively discussion flowed as the interests of each party emerged.

Having offered my story, I sat back and stayed silent. Timber was silent too, and I was surprised. I’d expected him to command the table, guiding things in exactly the direction he wished, as he always did. Instead, he allowed Oleanger to emerge as the clear leader of the former wolves. I frowned at him and tried to catch his eye. He would not look my way.

They talked for hours, until I was dying to stand and stretch. Or leave. Politics were boring, and suddenly I remembered that I was not important. I was the granddaughter of leaders, but not one myself. My magic was of no use here, and I had few other skills to offer. I was relieved when the talks finally concluded. A contract had been drawn up, which Victor said he would sign at the next meeting—in the daylight. He needed to see for himself.

“Supreme General, Mayor, an honor,” Timber said. He stood and reached to shake hands. It was the first he’d spoken in an hour, and it sounded like a goodbye. The village committee stood from the table as one

and turned to leave. But Victor turned back. He twisted to look at me with a question in his eyes. *Are you coming with us, daughter of the village?*

I froze. I had not considered it, but here it was—an offer to return home. After a moment, I shook my head slightly. Victor receded with the others; we watched as the gate creaked closed. The bar clanked into place.

“Think they’ll ever leave it open?” I asked.

Timber’s eyes were guarded, but still I could read them. *Do you want them to?*

Oleanger just smiled, our silent exchange unobserved. “Someday.” He turned, whistling cheerfully. “I think that went well,” he said. Sampson agreed, with reservations, and they launched into a rowdy debate as they walked. I lingered behind with Timber. It had snowed yesterday, only a dusting. Our feet crunched on the crisp frost.

“You were quiet.”

He was quiet again. Lately he seemed to keep his own council more than ever. I didn’t want to admit how much this practice hurt me. I’d come to think of myself as his confidante, the one person he could whisper his secrets to. But in breaking the curse, I’d doomed him, and he did not whisper to me anymore.

“You won’t be at the next meeting, right? That’s why you wanted Oleanger to take the lead.”

He nodded.

“It seems—Timber, it seems like you’re stepping back even more than that. Are you going to leave the pack?”

He laughed hollowly. “A group of men is not a pack. They do not need an Alpha. And I’m not like them. Even less than I once was. I do not think I am the best man to lead them.”

“But you’re a great leader. You’re helping them negotiate peace and build their homes. They look to you, and you have so much to give.”

There was a pained look on his face, and I wondered for the hundredth time in a week if he hated me for what I’d done...done for every one of them but him. He turned abruptly to face me and I almost stumbled as I tried to stop as quickly. The others were far ahead of us now, the sound of their jovial voices only a buzzing among the trees.

“Red, I don’t want to be their leader. I never did, but it was necessary. It’s not anymore, and I no longer belong even if I wished to. My path lies elsewhere.”

He got that faraway look I'd seen on his face a lot lately. He'd never spoken to me about what it meant. I'd felt the distance between us, but now I sensed that Timber felt distant from everyone else too.

Then just as abruptly, it was gone, and he studied me. His intensity pierced me, making my heart pound like it always did.

"I'm going to leave soon, Red. I don't know where I'll go, and I understand that you may not want to come. You may be happier here, helping the men start again. Or back in Big Village. Or with Selma. Things between us—" he tapered off, but I knew what he didn't say.

They aren't how they once were.

"I just can't let go," I whispered. Even in this moment, Gran's blue eyes haunted me. "I don't feel anything but coldness anymore. I don't think I belong anywhere."

Timber's jaw was tight. There was grief in his eyes. "I don't either."

That night, Timber and I went together to his old cave and made love. It was an act of fevered passion, of desperate unknowing. What would tomorrow bring? What was the future of us? *This could be the last time* was a whisper of poison in the air, and it drove me to devour him. My teeth raked his skin and my nails dug and pulled him closer to me. My mouth ached for more of his, and we kissed for hours. Bare skin on warm bare skin. Tears in my eyes, kept closed so that he could not see. *This could be the last time.*

After, in the hours before dawn, he slept and I lay awake. What was the way forward now?

Timber said his path lay elsewhere—but where was that? And where was my path? Who was I, after all the changes my experiences carved in me?

Granddaughter of a beloved village leader.

Granddaughter of an evil sorcerer.

Magician.

Best friend.

Lover.

I belonged nowhere. Which meant that maybe I finally had the opportunity to freely choose where I wanted to be.

I slept. In my dreams my grandfather laughed at me. He dangled his tooth necklace between his fingers. *I left you something*, he whispered.

In the morning I woke up and I understood.

It has you now. The vengeance.

I've left something behind after all.

I left Timber snoozing in his wolf form. I had to find a mirror.

A mirror, in the Woods—the closest one would be at Grandmother's House. So I directed Flora instead to a still pond, its waters clear and clean. It was a perfect day, cloudless and windless. A miracle in the early winter. I smiled when I saw the pond's surface; it was better than the best glass in the village. I saw myself clearly in the perfect blue when I leaned over the edge.

I looked so different than I once had. A halo of copper circled my head, the curls grown wild and frayed. The red-blond color had lightened in the sun, though I had no white streak to match Selma's. The skin of my face was tanned and freckled. My cheeks were leaner and sharper, and my eyes were too. All the time I'd been in the Woods, I thought I must look to everyone like a little girl: big-eyed, lost, and weak. Now I discovered the Woods had made me intelligent and calculating and ready. If I took off Gran's jacket, I'd find muscles beneath the sleeves.

But none of that mattered; none of that was why I'd come. Around my neck hung the tooth from my grandfather and I fingered it, lost in memory and conjecture.

Ah, my granddaughter. I've left something behind after all.

Yes, he'd left something behind in me—something more than magic and power. He'd left grief and fury and vengeance. Never would I forget the glossy emptiness of Gran's eyes. Each day I relived the memory and came away cold and lonely. It was this that stood between Timber and I in the days since my return to the Woods. This was the reason why I could not connect.

And I was not the only one so cursed. I saw the same hatred burn often in the eyes of the men who were once wolves. I saw suspicion and distrust in the villagers, even as they sat at a table to negotiate peace. Was I so sure that in giving humanity back to the wolves, I'd ended the war?

The burning for vengeance was in us all. He had placed it in us all.

I stared at my reflection in the quiet water. Blue irises stared back at me. There was something in the set of the mouth that looked like Gran.

You're either strong enough for it or you're not. Timber's words, which had guided me in every hard moment since he said them. They gave me the

answer now.

I spoke the words to break my grandfather's final curse.

"I am strong enough to choose love over hate. We all are strong enough."

Inside me, a vase fell off a table and shattered with a high tinkling sound. A gush of wind rushed out of my chest and disappeared into the stillness of the outside air. In my reflection, I saw my shoulders sag and relax under the leather jacket. I smiled, and that looked like Gran's face too. How warm my eyes were, and blue like hers. They crinkled at the edges when I smiled, with the same solid strength inside them, and our hair had the same wild twists. I sat back on the shore of the pond and I pressed my palms to the cool moist ground and sighed up at the bright sky. In a moment, my smile turned to tears, and I let them fall on the grass beside me as I stared at the sun and remembered her life.

With a sudden motion, I sat up and I tore the black tooth off my neck. I threw it out deep into the pond and I watched the bubbles as it sank to the bottom. Soon it would be buried in the sandy underworld, lost forever.

"Goodbye Gran." I don't know why I said it then. Only that it felt right. In my mind, a door slid quietly closed.

Timber. He would be at the camp by now. Pulling logs, probably. The only wolf left, I'd seen his loneliness but ignored it to bask in my own.

Now a thaw had come to melt the winter snows, and I had a choice to make.

I cast my gaze towards the invisible iron wall of Big Village. I could go back, and knock on the gate, and they'd see my face and allow me in. What might I do once I returned? My thoughts flipped rapidly through a picture book of options.

Take over Gran's role and lead them all safely into the future?

Throw open the gate, tear the iron thorns off the wall, and welcome the men of the Woods into the circular, cobblestoned streets?

I could knit, and drink beers with Marta, and rock in Gran's chair by a quiet fire. I could grow old like she never had, in peace and stability.

Without really realizing what I was doing, I stood up and I mounted Flora. My mind as empty as the sky, I found the path of the Huntsmen and I turned east. I brought myself to the gate and I sat before it. I stared at the iron thorns and I considered.

They might keep themselves trapped in there if I didn't go in and teach them. No spell could cure a people of their insularity and cautiousness. For generations the villagers practiced a way of life; even in peace they might stay on their circular streets and keep up their wall. Young girls—the adventurous ones—would still have to sneak into the Woods to find a different path.

What do I do, Gran?

But almost as soon as I thought it, I banished the question. I closed my mind to the answer.

For I loved my Gran as much as anyone could love another person. She was wise and brave, and I wished in some ways to be like her. But there was nothing Gran taught me as much as she taught me this: to fear the ferocity of the wild. To fear a life with no wall around you. These were the lessons she'd learned from the Woods, and if I chose like her then I knew what I'd do.

I would never again, as long as I lived, leave the path to run in the Woods, where the howling surrounds you and teeth snap and there is no escape back to the soft, flickering fire.

With a soft click, the decision was made. I turned from the iron wall that cut the sky and I rode Flora hard back to where the cottages were going up to house the new men of the woods.

“Where’s Timber?” I said to the first man I recognized. He pointed in the direction of the loudest construction noise, and I shook my head. I should’ve guessed. Suddenly my sense of urgency left me, and I dismounted Flora and I walked her slowly towards a cluster of shirtless men building houses.

Soon this place would be a village of its own. Perhaps they’d build a wall around it.

Timber was in his wolf form, of course. With rope making a yolk about his shoulders, he dragged logs from the forest to the work site. I could hear his exhausted breathing as I approached.

I stood back and watched his chest heaving. Lungs opening and closing, huge shuddering movements.

“Timber,” I said softly, but he heard me; his nose pointed immediately in my direction. I tilted my head towards the privacy of the Woods, and he nodded. I stopped at the well for a drink, and then I walked Flora slowly in

the direction I'd indicated. Timber followed me. I led him into the Woods, stopping when we were too deep to be overheard.

I turned on him, my hand absently patting Flora's back. Timber was as big as ever, towering above us both, but Flora had ceased to be afraid of him.

"I went to a pond today, to mourn my Gran. To make it so I could mourn, I think. To clear out what my grandfather left in me. And then...to clear out my Gran."

His eyes were puzzled. They spoke to me as always.

We can talk about this when I can speak back.

"No, we'll talk about it now, because there's nothing you need to say. It's my decision."

Now, he showed understanding. He had urged me to make a decision and I had. His eyes showed his resignation to whatever I chose.

Should I lay it out for him? How I'd remembered that the woman I was now could never live inside that iron wall? How proud I was to be this woman he'd helped me become? Should I tell him I saw him, my packless wolf, fading amongst the men he'd claimed? Should I tell him that I finally understood why he alone remained unchanged?

"I am not ashamed of what I am," he'd said to me once. *"I am not afraid of my nature in the darkness or the light."*

It was the answer. The sorcerer's curse was not fangs; it was fear and hatred. Yet Timber feared neither his wildness nor his humanity. He was proud to be a wolf and a man. Unafraid, unashamed. In him, there was no curse to break.

But we didn't belong here. Neither of us belonged to them, to these others. We belonged to the wild and the shadows, to the moss and the quick-rushing rivers where my heartbeat and his teeth could snap and dance. He said I didn't want him, but he was wrong. I wanted everything that he was. And I knew just where I belonged.

"Let's go," I said, and I mounted Flora. I turned her face towards the unknown depths of the Woods. There were so many places I had not been.

At my side, his quiet pleasure greeted my decision, and I knew I did not need to explain. In a second he was off, snaking through the trees so fast he became a blur. With a whoop, I dug my heels into Flora's sides and followed him. I'd follow my wolf to the ends of the Woods and past them.

For in his eyes there was love, and in his teeth there was danger, and a girl can't ask for any more than that.

There was nowhere to go back to. Not for either of us. At each other's sides, we were home.

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About the Author

Em McDermott writes every day in a tiny cabin in the woods of upstate New York, where the walls are lined with bookcases brimming with novels and fairy statues. She considers ancient myths and fairy tales to be the world's oldest fantasy stories, and elements from these tales appear in all her work. Em shares her home with her two loving partners, a small flock of dragons (cough, cough, pet chickens), and more zucchini plants than is entirely reasonable.

Em writes fairy tale fantasy and epic fantasy. Her stories are dark but are ultimately hopeful adventures of human love and transformation. You can read some of them for free by signing up to her newsletter at <https://stories.emmcdermott.com/free>.

Get in contact with Em on social media or on her website, emmcdermott.com. She loves building relationships with her readers.

